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She sat on the bank of the river Nile like any common peasant woman. Her feet were in the water, her hands were bare, absorbing the sun on a chilly winter day. Her thoughts went everywhere...

Her life had come to a turning point, not by her own choice or timing: but she had taken action. Women hate that kind of compulsion, to act unnaturally, against a lifetime's proper times and rhythms, but they do it efficiently and often irreversibly.

During all the years of her rule, her life had been at hazard every day, every instant of her reign pitched against the world as it was. After years of slow reaction against her Sun Power, the balance of forces had toppled.

She had given the dynasty six daughters. After the third daughter, she thought only of women in power: no fathers, no husbands, no sons. She bore another three daughters, and not even her innermost self knew their father She simply refused to know, to follow any dates. Her life was full and fulfilled; she entertained no hopes or expectations. Her future would be one long strain not to let go. A life without a male heir to count on, but with many men to fear. Another anomaly added to the many in her destiny. Every day, at sunset, the auburn sunsets of the Nile, with yellow reflections of dust, destiny con-

veyed its simple message to her: I have survived another day in beauty, truth and heresy.

Her beauty combined truth and heresy. The inner truth of the Sun. The outer power of the Sun. All the rest is fiction.

Sitting on the banks of Nile was the woman by the name of Nefertiti, the most powerful woman in Amarna, the Solar Queen, consort of a deposed ruler,bathing her legs and sunbathing her arms: long limbs, long head, tiny body. Absolute beauty might be seen in her. She could be anybody.

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The Solar King was a very sick God: notwithstanding his doctor's reassuring words, and all the teas he drank, and the ointments he spread over his heavy deformed body, he was neither thinner nor better. On the contrary, his head grew ever more swollen, his features shallower. This sacred head, anointed to the rule of the Sun Kingdom, consecrated to the faith in Truth and Beauty, went untouched and unhealed by the God of Life and Light. He was cast into the power of the Death Guardians.

He wanted so to look for her, to take her in his arms, to

take her to his bed once more, to kiss her smooth back and tell her he loved her. Without her, he was a finished man, maybe a dead King, no Truth, no Beauty...

His trusted messenger entered his chambers, bowing for too long. This gesture meant: no escape. Akhenaten mirrored himself in his own mind: he was truly ugly now but still in love, she was still pretty but fallen out of grace, they were both deprived of power... Did he have any choices? To save her or abandon her? To rule or to flee? There were alien soldiers in the palace, mercenaries who did not even speak his language. He had no choices at all. She was somewhere evading her enemies, running for her life, despising him and his promises of love and safety. Those shattered expectations of their rule.... Their joys, their conversations had no future. They had been the truth, and truth cannot alter or be falsified in past or future.

He mirrors his fat formless image in his swollen head. He bends his thin, deformed neck. Akhenaten says faintly: I am a man no more.

Nefertiti hides in plain sight, a refugee in the plague-emptied streets of Amarna: now she is both the Sun Queen and any common peasant woman: she is the wind and its dust, she is the Sun and His Moon, she is me and you, she is She and He... She took a King's

power, she took his glory, she took his children, she took his very death away from him: he was a king no more, she is a queen no more.... She haunts Amarna the royal city, feet blistering, growing dirtier and thinner, thinking of him, of his deformed royal body, his big belly, his heavy thighs, thinking, he is a God no more... There is no truth left to his stricken body. There is no truth to my faith. I do not love him any more... When love dies, then kingdoms fall, heads are chopped, people are angry-hungry, children dance nude and dirty in the streets with wild or half wild cats... Yes, when true love perishes... Though God had no future, there is always a future. Maybe good fortune, for somebody else. For the children. Some children die young, some inherit from you, some murder you, some bury you. That is why a woman must bear many. But some children are born as solitary beings, only and unique.Such was her fate.

Nefertiti had a stepsister of her own, Mutmodjmet, a jealous, lively, younger sister who was ready to change the world for her and against her. But Nefertiti knew she was One and Only, a woman fated by her beauty to persist for ages. Beauty was a woman's most-considered quality, but any woman knows how little female beauty is of a human being. Beauty is a selfhood contained within a bottle of perfumed oil. Her soul must look elsewhere for shelter, for a place of rest. Only old women can be freed for a spiritual life of reflection, a freedom

from womanly beauty and the men who enjoy beauty, adore beauty, harass beauty.

She seeks shelter in the alleys of Amarna, silent, hungry and disguised as a peasant, no thought of love in her head, no trace of love in her body, beautiful now only in her own memory. She touched, every now and then, that small, tight bottle of perfumed oil. Never used, never abused. The bottle was old, as old as her own awareness of her beauty. She had owned it before the power of her beauty became the grinding-tool of royal power. The bottle was still with her on a fine chain, for she always kept it warm against her body, even when she exhibited herself nude in public. Nobody seemed to see it then, a precious thing concealed and exposed at the same time. But without that bottle of perfume, she would never have dared to become a heretic. She would never had created a realm for the One and Only, for the God Aten. A realm now falling apart, its sacred Oneness torn by many Gods.

Her daughter Meritaten was married advantageously, thanks to her mother's beauty and her father's crown. Meritaten hopes to reign in propriety, in harmony with measure and balance, well-thought of by people, achieving power by other means than divine.

Yes, Nefertiti produced one proper daughter out of six, a

daughter she will never see again, in order to assure her chance at happiness. Meritaten was lurking in distant Heliopolis, rehearsing her royal wisdom and propriety, loving her mother dearly, but desperately trying to avoid her heretic, hectic ways.

Meritaten was even prepared to assume her mother's place, in her father's bed, if necessary. The royal bliss of family happiness: the princess would have dispensed with her mother, with her sisters, to slip into the bed of her father, to continue this customary bliss. It wasn't necessary. Her father Akhenaten was too old for that, already dying. Meritaten loved him still, as dearly as her mother. Dutiful Meritaten would remember how the family used to pose in Sun and Truth in front of cheering subjects, all of them lovely and nude together. It was the only bliss Meritaten could ever know: but it could no longer be. She accepted an appointed husband in order to save the lives of her family, to transform the heretic kingdom without too much blood, to deny the Truth and Beauty without too much pain for the lies and superstition, and to restore the vulgar mediocrity of popular thought. Yes, she did all this willingly, knowing that her father was dying, knowing that her mother planned to vanish forever. Perhaps she hoped that Nefertiti would escape from time itself.

Did Nefertiti vanish?

Hiding in shabby peasant wrappings, Nefertiti is free from the elegant power of royal femininity. She is invisible, a nonentity. Courtiers of Amarna pass her without a second look. She tells tales in the marketplace to children, in order to eat. Working woman and maidservants will pay to hear of the doings of the court, little knowing that it is a queen who tells them. The women want to know of love life in the court, how glamorous noblewomen succinctly enjoy the hard male bodies and the passionate minds of ardent aristocrats, men prostrating themselves in service to beauty, offering every talent...

Nefertiti tells these stories with indifference. The Truth and Beauty of her husband Akhenaten is beyond their imagination. How must it have felt to be him, a wounded God struggling to be virile... She felt very close to her royal husband and his woman's body: with feeble erections but endless invisible stirring, a god-king with breasts without milk, skin without hair, with thick thighs and enormous belly which had no babies inside. His terrible trembling love, for his daughters, for her. Akhenaten seemed pregnant even when she wasn't, sharing her nausea with her swelling belly, growing breasts of his own in the lactation period, losing hair from his head in post-delivery gloominess. Her ugly husband could become a woman out of his deep love,

assuming the Beauty and Truth of a glorious Sun Queen. But what dismaying price has she paid for that...

Who will rescue the Past, then? Already Nefertiti's royal image was being cancelled from Egypt's public spaces: hammered and chiseled from stones, decorations, censored from the language. She was collaborating in her own disappearance, becoming invisible even to her own self. What Queen can be buried with proper dignities in Akhenaten's royal tomb, placed in the spiritual center of the world, a timeless corpse to represent the idea of Truth and Beauty, of the One and Only, of the Aten? To remember, to be remembered. Who will remember the sense of her being and her deeds? Who will bear witness? Can it speak out, this silent bottle of perfumed oil?

No grave, no peace, no glory... But she was learning to survive: cancelled out from Life and a public Life in Death, she had silently conquered a huge space of freedom: a wasteland, an unknown kingdom of infinite cosmic powers: that of no Life and no Death. No identity. Her own kingdom, her own beauty and truth, concealed within a hidden bottle of perfumed oil that had had no beginning and no end, no sign of the human counting of time, no record of deeds on earth. She was a heretic Goddess and her kingdom all time and all space.

People will wonder for centuries, for millennia, wander

through the deserts of Amarna searching for the traces of a lost beauty: Nefertiti lived here... Nefertiti lived there, Nefertiti lived everywhere. Her undiscovered tomb, her undiscovered body will be invented, reinvented, forged and created everywhere through the world, people will fight and die for one clue to her life, for one hair from her head... Relics will appear,for they always do, as toys of a dead child, cherished more by the bereaved than by the child who owned them.

She knew about the modelled bust of Nefertiti, and she was happy with it. Then, she counted also on the survival of many precious royal possessions: urns, jewels, scrolls, combs, dainty objects from her women's chambers. She counted on her husband's lasting traces and those of his prepotent family, long in power. She has also learned to count on her own lasting absence: a mysterious lacuna, an image painfully erased from public space. Erased and censored, she will be everywhere and nowhere. Somebody must have given life to a Sun Kingdom and birth to six daughters, everybody will think. Who was she? What was her half-remembered name: Nofretete? Whose daughter was she, where did she come from, whatever happened to her...

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On the bank of the river Nile: a young peasant woman

was bathing her long beautiful feet and sunbathing her arms. Her long egg-shaped head and thick mouth moved in a song to the ruthless sun of Egypt, a searing presence that few could bear in August. It was 17th August 1963: the girl was taking care of a white, fat, spoiled child who spoke a foreign language. The Egyptian girl worked for her living, she wasn't a slave, but the foreign child was a conqueror, for obscure historical reasons.

She stood up. Swiftly and hastily, she sheltered the overgrown foreign child in her arms. She rescued it from the ruthless sun that made its white skin burn to red. The over-fed child kicked and screamed, hurting the small, thin and lovely body of the determined girl. She was tenderly fighting with the child for its own sake. The Egyptian girl, bruised yet smiling, won over the spoiled child. The child abandoned its fat pale body into the long armed embrace of the beautiful curved girl who smiled on her. The passers-by were unaware of this girl's beauty. The parents of the child, who had hired her, were similarly indifferent. Her name was also Nefertiti. Indeed she much resembled the bust of Nefertiti, much reproduced in every book and manual about an ancient Egyptian queen. The sculpture was well known, but very little else had survived. Even Nefertiti herself had never heard of Nefertiti.

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Nefertiti was an uncommon girl even in her very uncommon family. As a very young child she was precocious: her parents used to say, that girl was never a child.

She had the look in her eyes of somebody who knew her own condition but couldn't express it. Even her beauty, which was obvious from birth, was never the native beauty of a child, but that of an absent adult. A beauty somehow monstrous, a beauty yet to be, the beauty of an extraordinary being who had to be contained by clothes and taught manners, disguised to resemble a little girl.

Her stepmother said of her: she is a difficult child, she never speaks the things that come across her mind, but I love her more than my own girl. And that was true. Nefertiti remembered little of her own mother, but her stepmother was more her property than that of her stepsister Mutmodjmet. Her stepsister was a lively, pretty child eager to please, but Tey, her stepmother, was an eccentric.

Tey had little patience with her daughter's simplicity, with her common, ingratiating nature. Tey was a snob in the best sense of that word, one of those elitists who sacrifice their own lives in order to support the best val-

ues of the world: somebody else's values. Tey had no originality, no craving for power, no personal lust for glory, but she could offer peace of mind and comfort. She might seem a marginal being in the world; in truth she was the pillar of support for a truly creative spirit, a healing comfort to those who are doomed to suffer the direct impacts of life.

Tey inherited Nefertiti as a baby, from her husband, the potent Ay. Marriage to this ambitious widower was more tolerable because of Nefertiti: the child was a shield against a too-direct intimacy of husband and wife. Nefertiti's presence at the family's center gave Tey a certain freedom in her role as mother and wife; as they were never a natural family, their customs and rituals had to be constructed afresh. Tey loved nature, the fields, the flowers, the river and the desert. Her talent for openness was directly applied to her family; she loved every one of them as a separate flower growing wild and lonely, as a desert miracle....

Tey knew that Nefertiti was meant for glory. Tey did not know what glory was, however. Nefertiti did learn of glory. She cherished the days once the glory was over. Such feelings, tragic though they might be, were richer in sensation than glory itself. Glory was intense, out of control, severed from history in some way. It is better to dream of love or art than to consume it.

As a failed and aging queen in exile, hiding from long stares in the streets, disguised in rags with her face veiled, she felt calm and satisfaction. She had been cast from power -- cast even from the suspicion of her own existence. No one would recognize this creature of the market as a hieratic being, the Solar Queen.

It did not take long before Nefertiti realized that it was not necessary to hide herself from the world. She was officially dead; her heresy was uspeakable, an aberration that had never taken place. No man was hunting the streets for her; no priest or warrior was even thinking to search among the lowly of the earth. They were blind to her living presence... and as time passed, she herself was losing her acuity of sight. She had become, not just a nameless refugee in a damaged city, but a woman in affliction. With her eyesight blurring moon by moon, she sensed somehow that her public image was blurring too.

One day, an astonished passer-by did recognize her. She made no guilty start, though; she could not return his gaze. No one else had troubled himself about this wanderer in the streets, who was officially not only dead, but never alive as well. For all her rags and hunger, hers was a comfortable status. A glimpse of her face no longer excited fear and awe, only wonder, only thoughts and images.

Yet her beauty was inescapable. Beauty is not easily lost with age or a loss of caste. The skin can wrinkle overnight with harsh sun, a bad wind,but it is hard to lose one's looks when they have become the canon of beauty, the law of the artists of one's time. Nefertiti's beauty was giant and impersonal; it had been a matter of national pride, scattered all over Egypt. With her name and face erased while she yet lived, her face was doubled by many slightly different images, many names which resembled the original queenly name, The Beautiful One Has Come. The Beautiful One was denied past, present and future and yet she was everywhere.

She could not contain her own beauty like oil within a bottle. Others owned it, used it, spread it... And the stranger, he who recognized her, he had even admitted his responsibility for that to her, admitted it as an artist, as a man... As her lover. As a common artisan of Amarna, now the heretical consort of a fallen heretical Queen, a common man, a false God.

All Gods are false, thought Nefertiti, if I am one of them. Yet we are all true beings, if this is indeed my fate. And Beck the artist would add to her: all Gods created from the artist's chisel are true Gods; only we artists are false Gods. Glory may belong to the swiftest, but then the last ones are the only ones to last. And the Word is God, as well, Beck would say, and the Word is with God; but no,

she would deny him.

The Sun is God. My husband was God. We were lovers in court, we deceived him. This life of ours is merely what happened afterwards, after they killed God and erased his Truth. A life like ours has yet to find a God and a Word. Beck the palace sculptor, who loved Nefertiti the erased and forgotten sun queen, he who had once made her image the Kingdom's image of beauty truth and reigning power, who served his masters with pride and his God with humility, now kept the queen as his own chattel.

She wasn't bitter, on the contrary. She was a stable, aging woman,in a limited, slowly darkening life, a commoner's life as snug and solid as a dungeon. She lived with her artisan as his housewife.

She was pleasant about it with him, she was even humorous, for she was a Goddess dwinding into a mere woman, an ideal beauty gently turning into ashes, after many years of the inverted process, of a young beauty magnified into a Goddess. She had possessed it all, and then she had lost it all, as the price of a second chance.

Her six girl children, her divine husband, her reign, her power, her oils and incense, her poems, her songs, her personal objects... All gone... all gone but for sand,

smells and winds of Egypt, the features of her new home in exile from her old one. Nefertiti's second life was as barren as a looted tomb and as spacious as any disgrace, but she wasn't unhappy or lost. By her side she had the gross solidity of this human being, this man who loved her for what she was, who cleaned her body and face, touching her flesh with warmth and tenderness, a kind of awe in his coarse hands. Every touch of his made her feel a woman and not a Goddess, and yet to him, her every touch was divine.

What a couple they were, self sufficient and intertwined in basic life, a primal love like that of the first man and first woman. Yet so limited and crude compared to her spiritual marriage to a God Akhenaten, in the name of a God, Aten; in the name of a power, the Sun; in the name of an ideal, the Truth; in the name of a guiding image, Beauty.

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Nobody sees an old woman. People look through you without seeing you. Naked looks, which set you free and offend you at the same instant. A woman's youth is the opposite. In youth the stares of strangers chain you and offend again, but in a different way. It is a gaze that searches out your bones, your inner depths, your weakness. Men of all ages turn gazes of rape toward young

women, gazes which are veils, hiding the essence and personality of the individual.

In her old age, Nefertiti was free enough to walk around without veils, to bathe her wrinkled face in radiance as a sunflower, to offer emotional light to her blind eyes. Sunlight entered her eyes as a dazzling God now.She was losing her eyesight, after having lost everything else.

When she contemplated her previous life, only bits and pieces turned up now; a vivid epic with no sense, only hints of continuity. The strongest links to her old age seemed to be found in her childhood, in the years before divine marriage.

She had been given by Queen Tiy to Amenhotep VI Akhenaten, the frail, tender and mystical prince. Her betrothed was not a stranger. She was his cousin, and she had met him in the court.

His mother Tiy, the Queen Mother, liked Nefertiti better than her own sons. The Queen did love her younger son Akhenaten, but less than her firstborn, that handsome boy whom everyone had supposed would inherit the kingdom. He was destined to perish at sport, drowning in a foolish act of boldness. So Queen Tiy would have to settle for reality, a political skill that any Queen soon

learned. During all of her reign, Queen Tiy had been settling for this or that arrangement, a ruler with her feet on the ground, her head high up in the air but not cloudy, her hands deeply involved in the realities of power.

No queen can officially rule a kingdom, but the biggest challenge of a queen is to avoid being overrun by a kingdom, crushed by it and killed. Queen Tiy could turn the spinning wheels of fortune into a sturdy chariot that bore her to advantage. Queen Tiy was a born survivor, the daughter of a highly ranked but not royal family. Every day since her own royal marriage, her skills had been exercised to create and preserve her own life.No shield of divine power could be fully trusted to preserve those who knew the nature of politics. On the contrary, it was Tiy who paid for the irrationality of divine excesses, for the Gods made demands yet never bore earthly responsibility.

When her husband, the god-king Amenhotep III declared to her: -- My dear wife Tiy, our dynasty needs a boy-child; therefore, you will bear such a child for me because I order you to do such a thing, and you are a Divine Queen -- Tiy knew perfectly well that no divine orders ever made sons for men. Tiy knew well that royal women stricken by such orders would kill and bury their own daughters, substituting sons from harem

girls or buying sons from peasant women, in order to respect the Divine will, to preserve a Divinity from failing at its job.

Tiy knew that women like herself always met their duties. Tiy was no more unscrupulous than the other men and women of her time and place. Tiy had much bigger tasks on her hands, dark thoughts within her soul, and a huge vitality for survival. These qualities made of a woman a very strong, reliable and rather dangerous queen. Tiy was fond of Nefertiti, the motherless older daughter of her own brother Ay. Tiy sensed that Nefertiti liked her strange son, the younger prince Akhenaten, an ugly boy with odd features, but with a talk that could intoxicate. Nefertiti was not merely fond of Akhenaten; she really seemed to understand what he said.

Nefertiti's stunning beauty posed no problem for Queen Tiy. Nefertiti's youthful beauty seemed the empty frame of some unknown future majesty. Her virginal flesh lacked womanly warmth, and she never walked in the sensual, seducing way of the sophisticated women of the court; Nefertiti's timid face, ever quick to mimic her elders, had a decent quality of shame. She did not lure the courtiers with her good looks; when men seemed fascinated by her, the liveliness and clarity of her features became a tool to kill off their flirtations. Nefertiti's beau-

ty was not to be consumed or enjoyed. She was designated to marry a prince - a younger prince, not an heir.

Nefertiti's powerful father, Ay, guaranteed to his sister the Queen that his daughter was well educated, tough-minded in worldly matters of life and death: the young prince had no such qualities, and everybody knew that. Akhenaten preferred poetry to history, flowers to weapons, talk to walks.

When Tiy and her brother Ay decided to mate their two extraordinary children together, they also thought of ridding themselves of two peculiar burdens: this dreamer, this great beauty, they were too heavy to keep within a household, in the way that sensible households were best run. Tiy had married into the most potent dynasty in the world, rich and immeasurably old. Ay was a counselor and warrior, a man whose virility and quiet vigor assured the safety of the royal regime.

These two stellar children that brother and sister had given to the world, they were two happy burdens, the darlings of history. These two divinely gifted cousins, family aliens both feared and admired, were to be joined as one in the channels of history, and controlled through the royal institutions. As an adult couple, they might achieve great glories -- but always under control. Such were the plans of Ay and Tiy, for a marriage conceived,

arranged, and executed. Such was their pious tribute to the power and glory of the Amun the Great, the god they adored and served.

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One night, just before her death, the aged Nefertiti had a dream. She dreamed of being queen. In her dream, she had never been burdened with royalty, so she was surprised and wavering. She was in a desert, lying on bed of bare sand. The dune moved and whispered beneath her, a hamsin desert wind caressing her body. She had become a royal sarcophagus: both the body and the body's eternal bed. Within her dream, extreme peace and infinite silence had become the nature of her being. It was a joy so overwhelming that every other memory was forever buried in sand.

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Many centuries after the death of Nefertiti, an eleven year old girl, pale of skin, rebellious, spoiled and sunburned, was playing her own games in Nefertiti's desert. The nation where Nefertiti had once reigned as a Goddess, and then died one death among many, deaths as innumerable as Egypt's grains of sand. The endless dunes of sand, moved by the power of the hamsin wind, excited this girl. A girl of her tender years could under-

stand the infinite space that the dunes offered to her, the child of her own epoch... This alien girl felt the stirrings of divinity... Times had changed, young girls had few true queens to look upon. And yet this girl knew of Nefertiti, certain small unimportant details that a foreign child could pick up in the culture that surrounded her. This girl smelled jasmine, the moving sand, the wind that pushed it, the Nile once ruled by Nefertiti...

Such was the channel through time, in which this girl sent her secret wishes, freighted and burning, toward the dead queen. It was so hot in that desert that the girl suffered visions, she stifled screams when the dunes saw and followed her, and the wind sand-blasted her flesh. Faltering, she saw a huge queen made of sand, a majesty lying immobile. There was sudden safety for her here. Such visions are far too large to fight.

The young girl admired this giant figure, a body beautifully dressed in alien clothing, a woman's hair and long neck. The girl was stricken by a terrible desert thirst, she suffered mirages of shimmering water, lakes, trees... And then the recumbent queen woke and moved, she stretched one hand towards the divine blue sky, then the other hand, bending first one knee, then the other: she moved with grace but also stiffness, a mummy long asleep. She gazed at nothingness; she had one blank eye.

When she rose to her feet she was big as a dune, and she carried a tray. She offered her tray to the stricken young girl - on it, sweating and frosted with ice, nothing less good than a bottle of Coca Cola. The eager girl screamed with pleasure, in one second she had lost all her interior fears and put-upon grown-up attitudes. She leapt for the tray of the generous Goddess and snatched the delicious bottle.... running away with her trophy towards her parents' broken car, parked just beyond the dunes.

Mamma, mamma, look what Nefertiti gave to me -- she said proudly. The child's mother, weary with desert heat and the exigencies of car-repair, never looked, never thought twice: Yes my dear, just drink that. Let's get home quickly, before we melt. One can never tell why things happen as they do. Look at this car for example. It just stopped all of a sudden in the middle of the desert. Yet now, it is running again.

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Nefertiti's contemporaries, veterans of court life, naturally wondered. Did she really love her God-King husband? Did she love this prince as a man, or as a woman, or as a God, or a Poet? Or did she simply pretend this wifely affection, in order to seize power and remain alive? Rhetorical questions deserve no answers.

No effort, however honest, could answer that for Nefertiti. She and Akhenaten had undergone so much together, endured such transformations, assaulted and broken the limits of mortality, rewritten the birth of the universe and dictated its end... Nefertiti's one and only life was inseparable from Akhenaten's. When the God-King died so cruelly in his last pain and ecstasy, she was in perfect health and strength, yet had nothing to show for it. She was simply a corpse at once, a mummy in the very moment he expired his last breath, sliding into Eternity, with, she thought, a rather foolish smile on his face.

Standing as witness at his deathbed, she was disguised as a servant of her own daughter, Meritaten. The dying man could not recognize her. Crying tears of abandonment, Nefertiti felt a bone-deep fear warmed by anger. She was enraged by his willful departure from life, his dismissal of her into the world they created together. Akhenaten had abandoned her to a heretic court in collapse, an arena that could never feel comfortable or safe without him, a regime overcrowded by tall girls with elongated necks, royal women who played instruments and danced nude in the sun, because he, their Father and God, told them that such things were righteous.No royal Egyptian had ever done that before, nor would custom ever allow it again.

And thus came her fear. What will my princesses do in their suddenly blighted future: marry properly, stay silent behind some male functionary, chosen for political reasons to administer the realm? Six girls she had born, as the dynasty waited for a boy-king to come. One girl had died, yes, but five others lived and thrived and hoped for lives of their own. And not only them. Emboldened by the dead man's promises, other groups of girls in the court of Egypt were gathering in the Sun, proclaiming feminine beauty as Truth, as Power, as Word. Akhenaten, born as male, gradually developed women's characteristics, and finally, became a God of such muddiness of gender that his own did not matter or couldn't be claimed. His divine body, deformed by new shapes, was more than an illness; it was his claim to holy difference. The God-King dressed to show his difference, once an esthetic crime. He made Nefertiti the monument of femininity, building an empire meant to serve the idea of difference as divine superiority. Had the King been born a girl, his difference from humanity would have been normal, and thus invisible and hidden, but being born as a male prince, his difference became a surplus, a treasure, a challenge, and a threat.

Nefertiti understood his condition: emotionally, instantly, never as a matter requiring objective judgement. Her natural beauty matched his unnatural ugliness. Her beauty had threatened her from the very moment she

became aware of it, as a power that could be used against her if she didn't use it first against the world. She recognized in his ugliness a very similar burden, expressed through a man's world and philosophy. Thus, in order to be set free, they had to invent a new cosmos: and they did.

When he died, she went mad with rage. Should she accompany God to his tomb? She imagined herself in the sarcophagus, still alive, taking poison to fall asleep unto death. Would she feel closer to him and less angry if she died of suffocation, as he had done, in his last choking fit, piously invoking the four symbols of life: water, earth, sun and air? Was that what he was urging her to do, in his last fatal trance? Had he ever considered her own fate, as she thought of his so constantly? Maybe it had all been delusion, her love for him, her life with him.

As a very small girl she had lurked in her bed, in darkness, flying with closed eyes, flying until dawn rose within her skull. When she told her parents of that, they believed she was stricken, but she saw more deeply now. She had never been ill, she was only preparing herself to die without death, to live without a living body. To persist as soul, energy, power.

Every woman is a born queen. Very few rule the world:

every woman could wield power, oh yes, she certainly could, if given her own world and the freedom to run it. In some ways, women already rule this world, unbeknownst to its masters and themselves. But once they are seen to hold power, something goes wrong. Not something, nearly everything: those rules for ruling that were so good when hidden and unknowable, become inadequate and dangerous when applied in public. Women's language instead of soothing becomes irritating, women's punishments lose their sense of justice and become revenge....

Hatshepsut therefore became a man. So do most women who ever hold power on male terms. That was not Nefertiti's fate or choice. On the contrary, her female power was so unchangeable that her men turned into women. Following her strength, they turned out badly, losing the customary stolidity of Egypt's Pharaonic means of power, sinking quickly into decadence. A great empire of female power might have reigned for centuries,in glory and abundance, had the world been prepared to tolerate such a thing. But it isn't, before or after. The world is a seething battlefield of conqueror's wars, the glorious boy-games of Eros and Thanatos. Those kings that killed or were killed; they were not fighting in the name of a desert wasteland; they merely made one of the world, and then suffered by living in it.

Nefertiti and her husband adorned a new-built city with lakes and planted flowers; they perfumed the middle of the desert: they sang and danced to the sun, they exposed their own bodies, hugging and kissing, to the stunned view of their subjects; they bore girls whom they embraced from the throne. Then the world closed in on them. It was a butterfly metamorphosis, lasting only for one day: brief as true love, which, as some claim, can last only a few seconds at a time.

#

Nefertiti Means the Beautiful One Who Comes

She came among us, but she left no solid traces of her being. She has no grave. Her son in law was the famous child king Tutankhamen.

Parents eat their disobedient children, the Minotaur told us that. Some mothers can do this even while the child is in their womb. The beautiful lady who came among us, she who worshipped the Sun with her husband Akhenaton, revelled in her heresy for years... The infant world they had created was swallowed fast and totally, obliterated in one month. Yet they left behind such a potent violation of the norm, that notwithstanding the total cleansing of their history and their possessions, somehow we still know of it. Whatever we think

or say of them may be true or false, except the fact that they were there. Their lack of graves proves that they once lived. As people, not only as icons.

The beautiful lady who comes was very shy and conceited: I can imagine her walking and talking as a seventeen year old, her slender limbs too long to dress properly, awkwardly out of control. I can imagine her as a willful adolescent, even as she grew old. Youthful vitality never abandoned some stubborn niche within her body. Men might consider that a mishap, but women would say nothing of it; internal youth happens to some women without their effort or wish, as a pregnancy.

When she entered the court as Queen, the court bent to her canon of beauty; and when she was banned from power, the court turned its back on her as if she had never been there. Of course she was one presence there, not an absolute power. Women never rule in solitude, unless they turn into men. But once her own reign had passed, no one could distinguish her own acts of will from the grim constraints of bureaucracy, from decrees by reasons of state. What was it that she herself wanted? Was she as poetic, mystical and febrile as her husband? Was she as superficial and banal as her successor Smenkhare and daughter Meritaten, was she finally as weak and naive as Tutankhamen?

All these rulers had heresy weighing heavily over their crowns. Was that Nefertiti the beautiful one who comes, who breaks all the rules when she comes, and who makes no rules to replace them... Beauty creating a chaos, a void, that can only be retrieved through huge acts of creative energy, forming a new sensibility. Such a chaos had many later echoes, in the bare-breasted Minoan civilization, in an Austro-Hungarian empire where doomed Mayerling lovers fought the authoritarian father, whenever the arts grew heavy with revolution... When her storm first occurred in fourteenth century BC, it was a gust of desert wind that spread dust into people's minds, blinding, deafening. A host of energies concurred to hatch that whirlwind, many coincidences, laws and customs of which we know little. We have to deal with the withered remnants of millennia, be that truth or lack of truth, all the misguiding clues of which history's maps are made. Clues require a frame, a creative mind must assemble understanding... If not a coherent story, then at least some images...

Nefertiti was sitting at the bank bathing her long legs in the Nile: half blind from passionately staring at the sun, burning her dark skin to pain.

Every day, for hours, as she submits to washing by her troubled handmaidens, she breathes the sun-stricken dust, her nose wrinkling at the stench of her own dis-

grace... Victimized within the court of her stricken husband, threatened within her own palace by the Amun priests and Horemheb the warrior. Egypt is in downfall, and her enemies restore the rituals of the old regime, hoping through their empty gestures to conjure up power and wealth.

Every day she performed the same defiant ritual in the same place.

While her husband lived in near-captivity, banished from her side and denied all relevant public duties, her Sun-worship on the bank was a dangerous act of transgression. All the old laws are new again. She served the Aten as such: as an act of rebellion, a ritual of continuity. She knew that Akhenaten was too sick, too delirious, too weak to do anything but obey his captors.

They would let him be God for as long as he was willing to believe the fiction of power they offered him. But only she could now carry on with the supreme duties owed to Aten God of the Sun. She knew that every day she risked her life in this bold heresy. There might be an official execution, or a quietly ordered poisoning. She abandoned sensible precautions, and exposed herself to death as much as to the sun.

It was a crushing decision to make, when every particle

of her body longed to survive at any cost... but time passed, the sun rose and set, and she became so drugged with the fear of persecution that it became a permanent state. Without fear of arrest and execution, she knew no peace in her daily life. She had no resources left, no plan or strategy other than to wait to be killed. This became her doom, and her hope.

But much worse punishment awaited: she might forfeit royal life entirely. A glorious doom would not come. Martyrdom would be denied her; and in the new order of restored priests, her fate was invisibility. She became the mourning invisible widow at a wake at the bank of the Nile, a crazed eccentric who might claim that she once was a divine queen - a hag who peculiarly resembled some half-forgotten Queen who used to be the Beauty that Comes, and is now long gone, into nowhere and nothingness.

#

Whatever historians, enemies, heirs or witnesses may say in denial, it was a marriage of love and passion, that between Nefertiti and her husband god Akhenaton. The cousins knew each other for some time, not long or intimately, but well enough to know the burden of difference they each carried within themselves. Their admiration, their passion, that they held back in their hearts.

She out of silent beauty and proud vulnerability, he out of physical weakness and ecstatic state of mind.

They went well together. Court parties along the river with boats and flowers floating, wine served in abundance, servants dancing, music playing... They would shift to quiet corners of the party, aware of the invisible yet attentive surveillance of the mother Tiy and father Ay, their agents, their informants, their spying servants. Then they would talk; a few daring words, touching and exploring their common ground: confessions of feelings, hopes and plans.

Mother, I want to marry her, Akhenaten said one day, Mother, I love her.

Good, said Tiy smiling slyly as if only she had ever known anything about it. Of course Tiy had not made the marriage be; she was wrong in assuming she could guide Akhenaten's desires, but as all authoritarian mothers, she preferred never to learn how stubborn her son could become. If he didn't want Nefertiti, no laws or threats would ever have made him marry her. He could have wept himself straight into madness, or driven her insane through risking his own precious life in boldness. Her favorite son, heir to the throne, had been killed that way.

Ty was an attentive, cold-blooded mother; she had her favorites, but she knew better than to neglect the children that she could not like or understand. Akhenaten survived to rule the state, even unwillingly, and in the shadow of general mourning for his far more vigorous, heroically reckless brother. They all wanted a lusty King whose simple needs they could understand; they all had to settle for Akhenaten the queer. Akhenaton was fitful, half crazy with visions, strange pains, vomits, headaches, trances. But he entirely lacked stupidity, and his appearance of weakness was a sham. He cared nothing for pride and could never be bullied. He had no intention of ruling in the manner of his dead brother,his beloved mother, or his casually brutal pharaoh father, a man he particularly despised.

He knew that in order to remain strong himself, he had to weaken the ruling system. So he set about changing the rules: fitting every detail of state to his personal measure, as if a kingdom were a suit. The loving care of Nefertiti meant comfort and safety to him. With her at his royal side, he could be himself at his best.

One evening sitting at the riverbank with torches alight he recited one of his recent poems: he was moved to tears by the beauty of his own verse. Nefertiti listened in silence and instead of showing distress at his strange, teenaged face, streaked with tears, she took

both his hands in hers and kissed them. Akhenaten shivered, deeply excited.

For the first time she sensed his male interest in her. We will have joy, my lovely one, he told her fervently, and then we will have children.It is in my power to do whatever God wills, he told her eagerly, seriously. Many courtiers break the rules of proper betrothal and steal the sweets of marriage first. I can evade these spies set to watch us by our foolish parents, retire with you into a bedroom no one can see. But such is not my decision. It pleases God to wait for the divine wedding night. It is good to know that I can long for you.

#

It was during a summer party in July. He came to her by surprise and pressed his lips onto her; a kiss, as the wind. Every time that something would hurt her, be it word or deed, that kiss would pose itself back onto her lips. That first kiss. It was a madness, an intoxication, an obsession:she knew it and fought against it, but then, after some time, she began to enjoy it.

Nobody could see the invisible power of her lover streaming into her and through her. The tremendous flow of energy stored in her.... It lasted for ever, aloof

from reality, one kiss forever: its perfection, its divinity were not to be questioned, because such questions had no answer. She would bear children, assume all the duties of royal marriage, every heavy burden.... But the lightness of that kiss made it not only possible but necessary.

Dearest dearest beloved king of Aten, that is what my love for you in all those years was made from: of just one instant, of me and you becoming One and All. Our God was born at that moment, and God was killed the moment they parted us.

Nefertiti was given in marriage as a 14 year old girl: she became a woman when she first bled at 11 and a half. She was frightened at the sight of such blood. Her mother had died, so she went to her father. Her father called his sister and patted Nefertiti solemnly on her shoulder. Her stepmother soothed her for becoming a woman, but not so well as her mother might have done it. They bathed her, oiled her and dressed her. Rituals were carried out, instructions given. She was done now. She was never to touch herself there. Her servants washed her, splashed her clean: her womanhood belonged to the kingdom, and she was to be privileged and happy.

She was married to Akhenaten. He was the first man to

spread her legs, to touch her womanhood in admiration. Nefertiti was amazed and afraid at first, then she started craving his touch.

It never occurred to her to touch herself, until, one night, he asked her to do so. She touched her curly pubic hair with her fingers while he stared dazzled at the play of her long nails. He ejaculated at the sight, spattering her legs and belly. And he said: this is my gift to you, the semen of the God...

Another time, his divine gift flew straight into her face. Each night they played and played, and pleasure was in abundance. As he licked and caressed her, he placed her head next to his maleness. It found its way into her open mouth: again he came very swiftly, moving only with tiny lunges: Nefertiti choked and then he said: that was my gift to you, my semen of a God...

One day he rubbed his half erected maleness over her femaleness, and then he came. Her pubic hair was sticky and he gasped to her all at once: this is my gift to you the semen of a god.... After that day she did not bleed anymore. She started vomiting, her breasts swelling and her stomach moving. The doctors examined her naked female body. They stuck fingers into her femaleness and said in surprise: she is a virgin. She was, but she gave birth to her first baby girl exactly 40

weeks later. It was a mystery but nobody bothered to think much of it; a virgin birth is a minor mystery when it comes to Gods.

The sharp pleasure she had experienced as a virgin never came back again. She had given birth, she was a woman; with a uterus that cramped and bled with the moons, sensual deep and painful with lust. Some women from the court chose to put a spiral into the uterus, a copper or golden device which prevented pregnancy. It was not approved, this wriggling inner touching of one's own womanhood, but men closed their eyes to such women's games. Women transgressed in order to live, and since men could not abide by their own rules, they had to close their eyes.

Sometimes, in a spasm against lies and transgressions, closed eyes would open wildly. Thus gods would become artists.

Lost somewhere between poetry, hallucinations, fits and strange sickness, the young prince's body was transforming year by year. His piping voice was womanly, his hips grew soft and thick. His cheeks and chest were hairless... but unlike a woman, he had no desire for men.

The changes afflicting his flesh never seemed to alarm

Akhenaten. Being God, he admired himself and examined every change keenly, first confiding his medical privacies to his mother, then studying them alone,and finally revelling in them with Nefertiti.

After some years of marriage they started to look alike. He imitated her and she imitated him. He ordered the palace sculptors to represent them as equals in status and beauty. After the girls came, one by one, the six girls were also portrayed in a row of equal size. Thus Akhenaton controlled his warping body by becoming all of them at once, protected by love of the family, one corporal body of royal love.

In the artistic representations the family hugged, touched, smiled, held hands, showed intimate parts of their body and beautiful objects of grooming and bathing. This incessant modeling, the Amarna beauty cult, smacked of superficial vanity; it might have wasted royal time and energy better devoted to waging wars and punishing court conspiracies.

But the common people rejoiced in it, and adored the glamorous, langourous royal family: they were as blatant in their bodily needs as any commoner, yet they were royal and unique beings, publicly exalted in aristocratic blood, in goods, gifts and power. Those common souls worked hard to survive, and yet they still dreamed

fondly of pleasure and leisure, of lingering kisses in a day of rest.

When the fields flooded well and were properly worked, Egypt was abundantly rich. If hunger abated and plagues stayed at bay, the peasants were mostly happy about their fates. It was not their business to fret about borders or warfare, to imagine any dangers to the ancient status quo of state and temple. But wars were waged vigorously in times of abundance, carried out by generals who scorned commerce and the muddy production of crops. The wealth brought by peace and order encouraged the bordering smaller kingdoms ever ready to fall on peace and reduce it like a cloud of locusts.

Then Akhenaten as a ruler refused the Gods of his ancestors. Those too-many Gods with their senselessly demanding minor cults, those too-many ancestors with their too-many graves and tiresome rituals. Oneness. Simplicity. Truth. Instantly he created a oasis on the brink of an abyss. The single line on which he played was blessed by a lonely God of Sunlight, but it was a very thin and wavering line. Only very skilled players as he and Nefertiti could survive such a political gamble. But no one survived forever. The state of affairs after his own death, that he didn't know, or even if he did suspect it, then he didn't care. And that was the choice he had made on deciding to marry Nefertiti and

to make a new world come true: neither of them had cared for how long it might last. They both wanted something new to happen during their own lifespans, never minding the awesome aftermath of immortality.

When she gave birth to her first daughter, Nefertiti learned what pain was all about. As an unexpected consequence, she also learned the nature of power. The court had expected a boy, as a heir to their new kingdom. Even Nefertiti wanted a boy, because that desire was expected from her. It was easier to rule with a prince and heir at one's side.

But once the tiny creature was born the young royal couple didn't mind the disappointment. Nefertiti even felt relieved not to be the mother of a prince, always the focus of plots and discontents, while Akhenaten felt simply happy. Nefertiti was afraid of her own feelings after the birth. She felt so rich with her baby girl in her arms, yet also irrationally frightened that somebody might take the infant away from her, stealing the future and making their empire fall. Superstitious thoughts, sudden and unexpected, swarmed in her head: were she and her husband both so feminine that no prince could be born into their marriage? Was she a woman who could only give birth to women?

It certainly was a sign of divine will, when five other

girls then came into being: small, pretty and healthy. They were as pearls, as rare diamonds to be set in a crown. The couple thus decided to create a feminine crown among the cities of Egypt, to build a huge garden for a fertile Solar dynasty, to make a city freed from history, where every step of the new-founded streets would be a labyrinth of life not of death.Such was Amarna, a huge royal palace for an extended family bursting with feminine life: beauty was the guiding image of this royal oasis. Everything in it was to be necessary, yet beautiful. The waters, the gardens, the alleys, the homes, were built on interior principles, all part of a huge Divine unity. Every particle of the whole should be perfect: the perfume bottles, the make up kits, the plates, the brooms, the cups -- All the details built up into a whole, each particle resembling the whole,as grains of desert made up the desert itself. And the whole had its own void, a central plaza for fantasies: a fata morgana in public display to everyone who dared to dream and plan. All those privileged to live within Amarna, this queendom without visible walls, displayed their own dreams of a better world: music and dance and wine and beer and perfumes and lovemaking flourished.

Weapons, fights were banned, even rough movements and rough voices could cost an offender his life. Akhenaten believed that those who damaged Amarna's ideal beauty and peace should be annihilated. Absolute

accomplishments cannot be befouled by compromises. Even the wisest courtiers and best-bred aristocrats feared such exclusiveness. Many fled Amarna, then timorously gathered at the borders of the flowery city, building a shabby outer wall to house those misfits who had become refugees in their own country. The refugees did not criticize Amarna's perfection; they did not dare to speak out for many years. Their raucous,vulgar voices could not reach the absolute pitch of the flute.

#

My life has become physical pain. I touch the ugly sore on my eyeball, and the jolt of pain re-awakens me to my sacred duties. As long as the wound still hurts my mortal flesh, then I will know that my duty is still to live on, to act with responsibility and dignity because I am still a Queen Goddess. A deposed one yes, and an erased one, but not even Death can touch me now.

My beautiful body is going away, and when I finger the swollen pain of my blind eye, the lid blinks less and less. But although blind now, I can remember sight; I can even see the past and future. My thoughts have become my eyesight, they are not too keen and sometimes they are peculiar: fragmented, contradictory. But my unitary blindness knits a pattern. Thus I do see and reason, my seeing reasoning and thinking is all of one

piece,and the light is a ray of sun, a sun that shines only for me. I follow it like a sunflower, twisting my body, changing my axis, my balance.

People made of glass will shatter once they fall.... and those made of sunlight can never fall nor shatter. It is a matter of faith. The faith of the first is frail and flawed, too many elements, too many gods, shredding the sun... The second faith is one and only, powerful and indivisible: one God in me, me in one God.

I am a queen and a goddess, my blindness is my mirror. People who stare at me are stunned with fear that I know how to see them. The evil eye of a blind queen shatters their protection. They fear my anointed beauty and its heretic transformation: looking at me, they see the blight to their lives. A beautiful world has fallen, gone, but Nefertiti is here, was there: the one and only principle of truth.

#

What of the fates of the common souls: those whose faces were never in stone, marble, fine colors? Is their dust coarser than the dust of fallen Gods? Since their deaths were never marked for by art and works of art, perhaps they are still alive. Is life the time before death, after death, or both? How would we mortals know the

difference?

Nefertiti lies still for her life-mask, a death mask. Faint light touches the never-closing, wounded eye. A painful wound, a pulpy sore made even more painful by her own severe and regular touching of it. She lies on the sculptor's couch immobile, as the hot wax of the mask is spread across her features. Not the first such mask, maybe not even her last. A queen's mask is fit to last for eternity, it is the very witness of her being. Nefertiti was here: the mask cools and shrinks, perfecting itself to her face. Skilled hands pressure the material: every detail must speak: a birth mark, a wrinkle, lines of troubles, open sores and scars... The artist will refine the details, he will join the details to a whole, that whole being who breathes shallowly through her stiffening mask. She lies on the couch as immobile as death, for it is a duty to the Gods to behave as if one is timeless. If she could stop breathing forever at that moment, she would shed her material body. A painless moment of transition, like the small moment of eternity before falling asleep. To dream as God rules Time.

#

Nefertiti is drunk. She is stumbling through the sculptor's meager rooms,hitting and overturning the precious wine-jars, plundered and smuggled from her palace.

She has drunk too much of Akhenaten's lost vintages, she wants to end her life as his has ended, and she wants to suffer and scream as she does it. The sculptor seeks to catch her with his rough sturdy hands; he is after her, to restrain her. Her legs are sluggish, she cannot dodge or outrun him. So she stops, she breathes heavily, she turns on him. She has a dagger. He is not afraid of her or her dagger. She lunges at him, he moves aside, avoids the blade. She tries again to stab him, tumbling into his arms.

#

Nefertiti wanted to be her own maidservant: the only person she envied in her kingdom was her handmaid. The young maid's name was Nefertiti too, for she had been re-named after a Goddess. Her earlier name and history had been erased; service to Nefertiti was her only occupation. She was a harem child, born in seclusion from the eyes of the male world, given over for training in sacred service.

The girl was youthfully pretty and as dark of skin as Akhenaten's father, and though she shared a name with her Queen, no one would have mistaken their looks. They lived together day and night. Nefertiti the maid undressed, washed, adorned Nefertiti the queen. Nefertiti the queen envied every act of service the girl

Nefertiti offered her. Simple, private acts of dressing and undressing were denied a reigning queen. More to the point, a Queen could not undress another person: even her infants had been swiftly taken to be dressed by nursemaids. The Queen jealously watched her small Nefertiti bending and collecting royal garments as they dropped toward the floor. She would air them and fold them with care. The girl's hands had the craft of an artist: she would gracefully dice fruit, arrange the bits on a plate. When the Queen ate the fruit she saw the maid's mouth move with pleasure. The sight of that robbed her of all feeling.

Later in her life, the fallen Queen was allowed to feed a man with her bare hands. Beck, the sculptor would let her sometimes cut his fruit in tiny pieces and feed him bit by bit, from her fingertips. By then she was nearly blind, but she would wield the small knife very slowly, testing its cutting edge with a sensual fingertip, holding the fruit in taut anticipation before slicing into it. He had to risk sharing his home with a blind woman with a blade, day by day, night by night: that was what was left of her royal ease and pleasure.

A blind woman had become her own blind maidservant. She could still recall life as a Goddess before becoming merely human. She always remembered that best while holding a knife with a sharp cutting edge.

#

Nefertiti never owned her own life, and now that she is dying, she knows it. The force of death upon her is so great and irresistible that she realizes that she had always lived on sufferance. The life of a queen, the life of any woman is as frail as a spiderweb, invisible threads sticky with her own spittle, taut with her own spite. A web of illusions. Only immediate danger, terrifying force can shake her from the center of that web.

A kingdom that was also a family claimed a total ownership of Nefertiti's life. All of them acting, of course, out of love and care. Having been born among them, she also owned all of them as long as she might live. It would be presumptuous to feel bad or long for death. Weeping was prohibited to queens and goddesses. Royal weeping made empires crumble. The common people suffered.

The only way to possess herself was to end her life by her own hand. But this escape was prevented more than once, and she was also glad for that.The scars became memories of those moments when she had really existed.

She lost her eye and her ear. The left side of her lovely head was forfeit to her passions. Such disfigurement was a major shame and a curse to her reign. She lost

her shapely head as an irresponsible wild woman who had dared take back her life. She owned herself in those few disfiguring moments of unrestrainable personal energy. Such a monster must be done away with for good.

#

A powerful bird, no, a huge bat was squatting over her slumbering face, with his fierce claws gouging into her chest. The bat meant to pluck out her heart alive, and carry it, still beating, into the distant realm of the dead.

Many years later, in an empty tomb, where a queen might have been buried, a swarm of bats emerged when men first broke in the doors.

#

"Look at the bird flying, little one," says the queen to her handmaid. "What is this metal bird, it looks as if mummified, as if made of gold and stuffed with sand flying to some other star."

"It is the silver crane, my queen."

"But she sings no birdsong, just one long, deafening drone. Her wings are stiff. She will fall from the sky,

she must fall?"

"She flies far my queen, we cannot see her we cannot hear her, but she is there in another sky, she is alive and she is singing her loud song and flying."

Nefertiti the damaged queen. Her left eye blank and white. Her chipped ear bent as if missing. Surely she is blind, almost deaf.

The bird follows the sun as a sunflower does, pursuing the passage of time. The Solar Queen sees an aircraft over Egypt. No maidservant would dare to contradict a Goddess. Better to lie to her and call it a living bird. A girl is playing in the desert 30 centuries later. A bird, a distant airplane. An old queen, a young servant. A woman thoughtfully bathes her feet at the banks of the Nile. Nefertiti herself, the sound of her name. The bird and the plane were One. The figures of God. The past and the future.

The sky was one, as well. The Sun, that touches everything.

Common women do not dream of leading common lives. Uncommon women do. They are lucky in life, and lucky to have such dreams. Common women do not have such luck or such dreams. Common women are the owners of

their own lives even less than the queens are, though in a different way. When one has little, a small gain seems a great deal. And if one is reduced to nothingness, there is a freedom there which only a void can reveal.

Egypt's common women rarely sought to kill themselves using their own hands.They were already being killed day by day by their own lives, a death by deprivation as invisible and forbidden as any suicidal desire. What can we know of these women, obscurities in the grand shadow of their Queen Nefertiti? They, too, were there and they did nothing that left a trace in male history. Nefertiti broke with history, as a queen, mother of six daughters and a wife of a man who turned into a woman. But Nefertiti as her own personality, the possessor of her own being: lost, trapped, as thoroughly vanished as any woman of any time.

And yet: Nefertiti was there.

THREE COMMON LIVES

The Man Who Became A Woman

He never really could make it out, that famous difference between men and women. Yes, it was obvious, men

were men and women were women. But what about it? Cats were cats, cars were cars and nobody made a big deal out of it.

Philosophers wrote books full of questions as to why cats were cats and cars were cars. Poets wrote verses speaking about cats as cars and cars as cats. Cars and cats lived together in the same world where boys grew up.

When he was a kid, his mother used to tell him: "It's hard to stay alive in a place like life." He never understood this sentence, but then, he never really understood his mother, either. How could this person be just one grown-up among all the others, and yet, also his one and only mother? And she had another big problem as far as his empathy was concerned, she came from another planet: she was an adult, and a woman.

Our Man, still a small boy as all men are at some period of their lives, dearly loved little girls. He was quite sure that they had nothing in common with himself. When he grew up into a slightly bigger boy, he began to despise little girls, and then the whole idea of girls in general. Time passed, he was a tall, strong youngster, and he fell madly in love with a girl of his own age. They made love. Instantly, he promised her his eternal love. He asked her to marry him, and she said, yes, yes, yes. Three times.

They married very young, they had three children and they lived happily ever after for the next twenty years.

And then something happened. Or had it been happening all the time, gradually? The man couldn't judge that. He only noticed in dismay that his young wife had grown into an unhappy, still beautiful, but aggressive and silent middle aged woman. She refused to sleep with him, to talk to him, to support him.

He loved her still, just as he always had. His love had not changed its steadfast character from its very first day, when he had made love to her and then asked her to marry him. Maybe he loved her more, for he had grown fond even of the bad sides of her character -- and she had many, being a violent, unhappy and unsuccessful person. Once she had been young and promising, with all the world and all its men beneath her feet, and yet she had chosen him. Now, after twenty years of their marriage, she has only him beneath her feet. But he is still madly in love with her. He is dependent on her, watches over her as if he were her lifeguard, guards her from her own bad temper and her mistaken moves in life and mind.

What has happened? Why has she stopped loving him? Did she love some other man? Did she want a new life, now that the children were older? The world has

changed and women and men no longer unite for life. Oh, yes, so, maybe he was an old fashioned and romantic guy, like a character from a movie, or a soap opera, or a true Italian opera. And he persists in true romance:he loved his wife after twenty years of marriage, and after she stopped loving him.

She decided to talk to him, to tell him. Tell him what? Well, lies... Anyway, she decided that they must talk. They bought a bottle of whiskey, even though she didn't drink, and they solemnly opened it.

Yes love, he said
Don't call me love, she said.
What shall I call you? he asked her
Don't call me anything, just listen to me for once.
I have always listened to you
You think so, LOVE, but you have only listened to your love, Love
Don't be cruel, what's so wrong with my loving you all these years
The fact that you didn't notice that I stopped loving you
I don't mind that, I still love you
That is selfish, you ruined my life by loving me without caring for my love for you
I will always love you, whatever you feel

You woman-killer, just stop it, stop loving me and look

at me. Let me go, please let me go, you ruined my looks, my career, I became the object of your love, the thing that you love, who could be anybody, because you are a maniac who would love anybody who stayed with you as I did, ANYBODY. You don't see me, you don't need me, you just need your love...Stop it...

The man started crying, usually women do this first in arguments, but this man was different. He was a nice man whom his wife didn't love anymore. And then, after a bottle of whiskey and a cruel conversation lasting two and a half hours, she simply hit the door and left him. Left his house, with his car, kids, savings, his name and pride: everything they did together and made together. He let her go. He had no choice, he still loved her and he had to let her go, loving her. He didn't dare think of his future without her, or hers without him. He could not even hope that she might come back. He just sat back and started to think, very slowly, as if unconsciously.

What went wrong? The big question. Or was it all right, somehow, the way it had gone? The big answer sprang to his mind: whatever happened should be recognized as the true state of affairs. So he loved that, and he accepted that as some kind of temporary answer.

Then another development: the kids started bothering him, asking him for money, food, attention. Being rude,

not nice, not as his kids had once been.Then, he himself started growing bald, fat and bad tempered. Then something large and general went wrong in the part of the world in which he lived. People were menaced, they became unsafe, uneasy about their futures, about the sense of their life. The end of the century? Middle age crisis? Loneliness?

All and nothing.

And then more events, almost preposterous ones. He lost his job through winning a lawsuit. He lost his sleep and appetite, but he became industrious. He lost all interest in his ex-wife, of whom he had no news whatsoever.

Ten years have passed by in the meantime. They children have left home, they return only to beg favors or ridicule him. They have girlfriends, boyfriends, friends, in-laws and children of their own. The children have became mediocre, noisy adults whom he loved for some reason he couldn't remember anymore, but whose presence was intolerable after half an hour.

He never entered a new relationship. Every such opportunity was a chance he chose to miss -- or maybe they weren't chances, only chimeras. He rarely thinks of women any more; his love and sexual life has come to

an abrupt and violent end, the moment his beloved wife left him, and he let her go.

Why on earth did she stop loving him... After ten years an answer came to his gut, unglimpsed by any previous thought. When his wife had left him, it was because she was a dead woman. Dead just as as he is now: a dead man. Why do women die so much earlier? Is it because they are women, or is it because men are happily married to them?

Dead by now, as dead inside as his ex-wife, he decides to look her up. They meet politely in a cafe', near their ex-house. They both have changed, and they remark on it, after shaking hands without a blink, without a kiss. Both dead, both killed.

She has grown calmer, he has grown sour. Two different people, once knowing each other intimately. Not intimately -- knowing a floating mirage.

I don't love you anymore, he said immediately, to set her free forever. I know, I can feel, I felt it years ago, and I am free, finally free. So, how does it feel to be free?How does it feel not to love me anymore, do you feel free? They both stayed silent, drinking coffees, no more whiskeys. They enjoyed their quiet afternoon, shook hands once again and said good bye, this time parting

for good, heading towards a true physical death. Now, they could tell the subtle difference between death, and death, and death. Or was death another step towards yet another death? Love is a strange variety of death, he thought taking a shower immediately after their meeting, so as to rinse off her touch, her look from his body. I loved that woman more than myself for most of my life. Now I don't love her anymore, nor do I love any other woman; I don't even love myself. What has happened, he thought, not angrily, not sadly, simply seriously, as a scientist, as a thinker.

As the faucet showered steaming water on him he looked at his naked bulk, flushing because of the heat: it was a shapeless, huge, pulsating animal full of blood and tissues. He was a strange living creature, a creation of God or Universe, a miracle... Once he was a man who loved a woman. Then he became a man who didn't love a woman, then a man who didn't love himself.

And now, naked, skin scalding, he is a woman who once wanted to be loved as a man.

She has made a full circle of painful understanding, now. She turns off the boiling shower water, finds a towel, and decides to start her life anew. Based on this ridiculous moment, this comprehensive understanding of life and love. Of course she will never be able to

explain this event reasonably to anybody, not even to herself. But who cares? Is love something you can explain, is life something anyone understands? And is changing permanently, from man to woman, inside a shower stall, something that anybody will ever think to ask about? It is definitely not, and that is some kind of guarantee, so far as her new life is concerned.

The Chisel

Would you betray me with me? she asked him.
Does God exist? he countered.
You have to give me an answer.
Does love exist?
People in love exist.
Would you betray me with me?
No, I would not.
Why, am I not attractive enough?
Your thoughts are dangerous, he tells her firmly.

Where is the chisel? she asks after a silent moment.
I will give it back to you, he promises.
When will you give it? I can't stand you when you take my things from me.
Your things are always yours, while mine are ours. That was my chisel.
And the baby?

Part of the baby is mine, mine, mine. And the part of him that's mine is always mine. Until I'm dead, and then he can be whatever he wants.

But he is yours as well as mine, in every moment.
That is a problem. It's his problem.
I will never give you back that chisel.

It is our common chisel and for now it happens to be with me. If you need it, then ask for it. What do you ever need a chisel for? It is me who is doing all the repairs.

She made a few steps towards the door. Tears were already falling. She tripped headlong over the infant's toy. Her head crashes into the edge of the windowsill. Her forehead was badly cut, bleeding, her eye was oozing and her stricken face seemed to stare from another dimension: the bleeding cut mixing with tears. She sat heavily on the floor. The sun was falling on her. Her eyesight was blurred. She didn't clean the tears and blood which pattered on the floorboards. He was looking at her electrified, but he didn't want to intervene. She felt free now, although she did not flee to the door.

She said:

That is my chisel and if you do not give it to me immediately I will take away the child from you.

I will call the doctor, he said.
No need, I can do everything by myself.
Another commonplace remark, he said.

She stood up alone, rising without his help. He felt abandoned, unloved.

He watched as she cleaned her wound from water from the sink, trying to clear her bloodclotted hair, dabbing at the trail of blood down her blouse and over her breasts.

He decided to return the chisel to where it had been before, but without telling her.

The Invisible Woman

At the age of thirty five, her life was all over. She had lost all interest in herself and her fate, and there was nothing more to be thought or said about it. The emptiness around her body, and the mental poverty of her philosophy, confirmed her strong belief that -- besides the fact that many people should never be born at all -- most others should die before a certain age. She was likely fortunate to have reached the grand age of thirty five. Although she was a childless, unattractive woman without a career, she had managed to reach a physical age when ancient, glamorous, mythic queens of Egypt

had often been dead for years. Standing in front of the mirror, examining her shabby face ...

My, my, she sighed, only emotions, so that is what is left behind when one's life is over, only emotions, packs and bags and sacks and boxes of unformed, unformable, unbelievable and untruthful emotions. Well, I didn't have any children, I am glad, lucky and happy I didn't, because otherwise they would have been the target of my greasy, sticky, formless sentimentality.

She looked at her face more carefully in the mirror, an expensive merciless mirror which showed her full figure, her every pore, her gray hairs and unpredictable shadows. In youth, the face had been silly and frightened. And romantic and foolish, and ridiculous nearly all of the time.

She used to say to herself: if I were a man I would never, but never ever fall for a woman like me. And men didn't fall for her. Those who did show some interest were clearly foolish, and superficial, or calculating for some obscure and sinister reason. She spent her life with people, men and women who didn't love, like or respect her, because she believed what they were thinking of her; their opinions held water.

Now that everything is over, now that my time has

come, this stupidly living body in the mirror, it will torture me as a monument, as a tomb!

In one second an image flashes across the mirror: a man she had once rejected held a pistol against her temple. She waited eagerly for the gun to fire. Then the image, merely half-remembered, disappeared. Perhaps the graceless body in the mirror will have the good sense to decay into earth and dust, spontaneously, together with her life. Yes, at the age of thirty five, in front of this mirror, instantly, at one merciful stroke, all over.

Help me, somebody help, I am so alone, and this face and body are traitors to my fears. They lie about me, help, somebody help me step out of this coffin, this mirror frame, this shameless exhibitionist picture to the world.

Slowly tears came to her eyes: she crushed herself down to the floor and started crying. Weeping after all these years of silence: yes, she once aborted a baby, her scorned lover has never returned to her, her ungrateful sister has abandoned her, her unremarkable parents have been dead for many years, and now she is poor and lonely. She wanted to cry most about her best friend, that woman who never phoned her after marrying a possessive idiot. If she only had kept her baby:

then life would have been different.Not that she minded losing a baby, killing it or whatever, from any religious point of view. But wouldn't that, at least, have been a different lifestyle choice? No, that sounds promising, but it is not true. Because you can only try one choice in life, and you never get to compare it to any other choices you made in other lives. One can lead only one life, and all speculations otherwise are forbidden.

It was early March: snow was falling, wind was blowing, and the woman has just celebrated, alone, inside herself, at this very instant, her thirty fifth birthday.

And now she rises, for a final combat with the mirror. And look, there is a miracle from either fairy tales or certain psychoanalytical case histories.The mirror simply looked back at her, entirely empty. She stood up proudly and turned from left to right, spun around her heels. She was as translucent as a vampire. She felt great, invisibly great.

Half a life, struggling to make one's inner spirit visible to the world. Another half a life, struggling to put the best face one can on a world that sees you for what you are, and cruelly frames you to its own requirements. At the midlife instant of turning 35, she has achieved a mathematical balance. She has become a zero.

#

Nefertiti knew that she had failed to earn immortality. She was not of the oldest royal blood, and she had failed to give sons to the dynasty. She never had a doubt that ashes would be her only testament, loose sand her only pyramid, obscurity her future. It was heavy but inevitable knowledge,a suspicion that grew steadily as she gave birth to her six daughters and became the most powerful and beautiful lady of the kingdom. As her glory ripened she became keenly aware that it was a passing thing, ephemeral.

Wisdom made her desperate: all these immortal gods around her and herself a mere shadow of passing flesh? So much in power, and yet so invisible.

Perhaps art and artists could create lasting signs of her life: Nefertiti was there. Who could say that, who could do that, who could prove that? What reward would such a skill deserve? Without a public image, one never knows if one really is, or if one is just imagining one's self to be. This world has no shortage of women, and even beautiful ones are just dust, sand in the dunes.

Who among this swarm of priests and courtiers could capture her image in stone, stamp it on the fabric of reality, prove to the people and to herself that the

Beautiful One Who Comes had arrived for the ages, that Nefertiti really was there... Beck was the one to do it: Beck with his heavy, working hands and a dispassionate eye for proportion that saw through both hate and love. His gaze on her was full of questions, but his hands on her had hardly any doubts. He knew the truth; his only challenge was how to reveal the truth without being executed for doing it.

He made her bust, a model for many others. He made it without completing her left eye, and then he said it was deliberately unfinished. The other sculptors of Amarna, those spreading images of the Queen across the nation, knew how to make eyes and would not need a left eye. She knew, though, that he had learned something others did not know: the immortal Queen Goddess was losing her sight there.

The perspective of the half blind woman is heavily biased by simple truths. Such as; the right and left sides are not equal, people are not equal; and once you cannot see a thing, it does not exist...When they made love in the night's thickest darkness, no one saw their inequality; when he vanished from her bed before dawn, he had never been in it at all.

When you burn your hand baking for your children, or you lose your eye trying to stab your lover, there is no

story to tell beyond the scar: that place of love that now feels nothing: the scar tissue that lived too much to stay alive, on the body; instead it becomes the deadened sign of a place where divinity once dwelled. The immortality of Nefertiti in her void, her royalty in her invisibility, and the divinity of Nefertiti in her flaws, lies precisely in her missing eye. The world, not being a dream, denies us perfection. Only the imperfect can enter this world and remain there. Nefertiti was one who came. Nefertiti was there.We know that though the rest is mystery. Let us face the naked power of the cosmos with the ruthless truth: whatever you do or say means nothing. Futility gives a terrible and desperate freedom. All women know of it, and the more they know, the better they rule. It is a desperate insight, barren, free of love and warmth. Mankind are mayflies in the eyes of the immortal gods; what does it matter if old parents bury young children, or if brother treacherously murders sister in the prime of her life?

It is thus a good scheme to allow loved ones to escape harm through arranging your own murder. Nefertiti helped her husband and royal daughters by ceasing to exist, by forfeiting immortal life and choosing silence and invisibility. She knew that, in her absence, their triumphs will be called accidents, their relationships a sickness, their objects and arts ludicrous and blasphemous. An affront to the soul... But no soul is necessary

if you do not have a body. If the heretic Queen vanishes, there is no sacred body to embalm, wrap, and store in a pyramid. The pain, the thoughts may be there, but there is no flesh to register them.

#

There were days when Nefertiti woke from dreamless sleep with very simple wishes. To be someone who comes from nowhere, has no name and no ideas. Those were days she missed her mother, a mysterious absence throughout her life, an unknown woman who surely would have loved her anyway, pretty or not. When she saw another woman pregnant, she imagined herself, not as a mother to be, but as a fetus. For her, the world divided between people who had a mother, and those who didn't. It was as strong as the division between the sick and the healthy, this abyss between the mothered and the motherless. Were the motherless also sickly somehow? It seemed to her that her strength was really the lack of an emotional weakness, that sentimental flaw where your mother lived within you, an attachment that might be desperate, a kind of navel, a wound. She felt herself as compact as a fireball or a star, without a mother's wise or loving presence to mar her own action and thought. Her love was a wildness, an unbridled strength and power, because she came from nowhere and had no one.

One's first love in youth might be wild, primordial, strong; but one would yield to experience, to tainted loves that were poisonous, acidic, vicious. She loved the perfection of beautiful objects. She loved Akhenaten because despite his divine destiny, he secretly wrote verses doubting his own knowledge. He was considered crazy or sick, but he simply knew how to doubt with beauty, construct a beauty, live a beauty and be beautiful.

She was unsure of her birth date: her late mother was the only one who knew it, and for unknown reasons she had died without telling it to anybody. Nefertiti never adopted a date at random; she preferred to have them all and none, as unknowable as the date of one's death.

There was no distinction then between time and myth; kings might live forever in just one day, reorganizing history by starting new calendars from the years they assumed their kingships, and counting all previous years backward, stretching to the dawn of time. A reigning Queen could be the linchpin of a people's history, the axis of the temporal universe, although she might be stabbed without warning, poisoned on her throne or ravished away by invading foreigners.

Sometimes the nights were long, dark, stale, feverish. Then the hamsin would blow, a hamsin wind arising

long and strong enough to change one's very fate. A weather-change that was compulsive, violent and out of control, like a change in royal regimes. During the storm hours Nefertiti would drink wine, after having drank beer all day to keep the heat from her nerves. But a drunken sleep lasted only a few hours, broken by haunting nightmares.

A dream of plague, covering her body in a wild rush. She dreamt recurrently of black spots turning into ulcers and bursting out, from her right leg to her head. The dream was so vivid that only physical pain could assure her that she had managed to wake up. She would sweat and twist in her sleep, smelling her own body decaying in the grip of the pestilence. She had always been willing to accept death, but not a slow one. She struggled to speed through a night of ugly images, ghastly sounds, noxious reeks. She would wake up in a sticky, humid dawn, gaze with surprise on her intact body and feel not even relief.

She dreamed herself with bad spirits, and she felt good about it. It was preferable to the uneasiness of her mortal life, a period of middle-age, shiftless, restless. Such a change from the dreams of her childhood: that she was in skies, she was immortal, she was beautiful, she loved -- but even then a shadow of doom would always cloud her innocence. Oracles offered grim predictions:

she would thrive only to perish utterly, her children would leave no trace in the world...

Twice, the royal wine she chose to drink had been poisoned, and her dear small maidservants, the preparers and tasters of her food, were lying dead as cats at her feet. Once a huge attacker sought to drown her while she was swimming in the sea. He was a slave, and it was claimed that he gone mad with love for her, his Goddess whom he wanted to rape and possess. On those occasions, Nefertiti fell from hieratic peace and stability into a panic of attempted murder, whilst in her dreams, she rose from nightmares back to a sense of mortal survival. This was no source of rejoicing for her: it was merely a balance. Possessed at night by powers beyond her will, she seized the hours of daylight, to radiate power and glory.

Her nightmares harbored specific fears, menacing, floating, untouchable. A ghost queen, a lost mother, a motherless mother. In her dreams she longed to be embraced by this apparition, and to know the truth. Had her mother been killed? Executed? Exiled beyond all return? Or just hidden for her own sake, for the sake of the good name of a Goddess Queen. Rumors spread through the servant girls at court that such a lady had been somewhere mysteriously hidden, maybe even buried alive. A Lady who gave birth illegitimately to the

most beautiful woman in the kingdom. What girl, tempted to trespass, would do it gladly, if she knew that her illicit love would give rise to a child who was a queen?

Dreams of sudden and violent death, dreams so vivid and restless that they might be visions of the future: her heir, young king Tutankhamen, with the back of his skull caved in with a single cunning blow.... Or visions of the past, the great Queen who ruled as a man, as a woman abolishing gender differences in living and exercising life: Hatshepsut.

Madly In Love

A CHOICE

I made this stupid, very stupid
Choice to love you
And never let you go
I will let go myself, me
Material and spiritual goods
Called us, we
But I will never let you go
I made that choice
Voluntarily
Every morning it hurts

And burns in my stomach
That choice
Later on during the day
It gets better
Very much so
Some time in the afternoon
The pain turns into heat
Deep within the bones of my hips
Now that hurts too
But it is fast and short
I stand up firmly
Kick it out with a foot dance
And roll on
As the night falls
The peak threatens
It always betrays
My discipline, my choice
I start doubting and
Cursing and loving
And drinking and
Forgetting
As the night gets stronger
And longer
Things get wilder
And actually out of
Control
That is not pain
My beloved one

Anymore
That is joy, pure joy
Exactly
Why I made this choice
But why did I
To tell the truth
There was no choice
I call it now mine
I call it now choice
Because it lives with me
It hurts
It burns
It glows without you
And soon it will glow
Even without me
Because you see I am leaving
Leaving you, leaving me
But never leaving that choice.

It Is Happening So Soon

Remembrances of my old loves, and times when love seemed possible, yet never turned out so.

Love without pain, without regret, Eros ruling even in my fear of a painful death.

My life is changing without my will: tomorrow I will find once again the timing, the formalities, the strength required to survive.

Should death arrive, I will merely comment: sorry it is happening so soon.

Sorry it is happening so soon -- I'm afraid that's all I can say about death, and if I do say that, death will still happen.

Emotions of boundless love and endless fear of dying, the two primal secrets of life, stilled in one instant by death itself.

I am so fragile, so vulnerable, so disordered? I am everywhere and nowhere.

I am a queen? Yet I belong to one who loves me, who picked me from the dirty earth and restored me to humanity.

Do I have any right to hope?

My love, I manipulated you with my sickness and weakness.

Will you abuse me for it?

I am ready to be anything to you: your mistress, your queen, your servant,your invisible icon.

May my survival set me free from any other duties but to serve you.

Giving is greater than taking, and to share is to breathe the air of the Gods. The rhythm of our conversation is the divine breath. I am you, I am your body. I need no body of my own: you may possess any body that pleases you, take mine, take another that lies besides mine, do without me at all.

I will love those you love, in the way you love them, at the moment you are doing it.

It may happen however that my heart will break. It will break with utter dedication, bursting in my tears of joy, wafting through the air you are breathing: energy, dust to dust, air to air, love to the words, me to you,you to the Gods.

I Cannot Look

I cannot look at you, for your beauty shines as the sun
Your beauty burns my tender eyesight
Yet I fear neither you nor the sun: if I suffer blindness,then my blind head will be graced with divine voices
My gaze falls on you like a beam of light,a light which only stronger light can dim;
Be it so, may you as potent sunlight blind my searching eyes and burn away my troubled heart and mind as well, so long as I may love you forever.

If You Were Free

Even if you were free
Even if you were near to me
Even if you wanted me
I would have loved you in the same way
As if you were imprisoned, far from me and scorning me.
Because that is my love.
Just drops of eternity, longing...

Nefertiti And Beck

Whenever she wanted to tell him: I love you, an enormous fear of his death would overwhelm her so suddenly and strongly that the words dried in her mouth. She would hug him fiercely, as if love meant nothing beside

the fact of his life. Once in bed, once making love to him, she would feel the same fierce drive, but somehow the act of lovemaking eased it. It calmed the urge toward survival, even the fear of death. The more passionately they made love, the more she felt emptied of love afterwards, and free of her fear of mortality. Eroticism was invented by those who cannot bear a keener passion: we cannot join our bodies all the time, but each of us is a body after all, and nothing can alter the fact that our date of birth comes immediately countersigned by another date yet to come, the date of our death. And nothing, not even blind love, and love is always blind, can alter the fact that we are some day doomed to stop loving.

So whenever she was panged by love for him, she just made love to him: but the loving words that he uttered to her, the poems he made for her, caused an anguish keener than the lash. Nefertiti had married an artist in order to be loved by words; he had married a beautiful woman who no longer cared for her beauty, but only for his artistry: because he knew the Word was God,and not beauty and not decay. They both knew the Truth and risked their lives in dark times, ahead of those other times when doctrines and cities would be worshipped as Gods: Gods of topography, of the soul; an inner and outer geography, invisible and material threads of the same unattainable element, the perfection of sensation in a form.

Love had been given an image in her time; the image of a beautiful woman who comes, an image of herself. His song for the sun was a confession of love, and when the beautiful lady comes to him as his own lover, he cannot think of her body, her woman's body that will be consumed by him or by worms, never mind the difference: when he loved her, he had to imagine the sun, the eternal beauty of the eternal sun. And thus her body, revealed to him in sunlight, is not the mortal flesh of his beloved one.

Their mutual faith in the Word let them travel centuries ahead of their time; they didn't know this, though they pretended to know all. They played the Gods, because that was the role they were given, the language assigned to them. They overthrew Other Gods in the name of One and Only, and together they became Gods greater yet, in the name of the Sun and the Word yet to come.

When she wanted to cry out her love to him she remained silent ; she offered her body to him or to anybody else, it didn't really matter: she wanted him to live, and in order to live, their bodies had to protect them from the timelessness of words.

Words can flow ahead of time, ahead of any speaker's intentions.

When they spoke to each other, waiting for the Sun to dawn, they found pleasures more intense than an embrace. They surrendered love making for the pleasures of speech. He became part of her being throughout her words, and through his words, she became even more herself. Is that what the deepest love between a man and woman is about: that he should become a She,and she a space for both: no conflicts thus, no genders, no wars? Just truth and beauty.

Love happens all the time, in any space that allows it: the servant Nefertiti, named for the Queen, devoted, humbled, dearly loved her sister's husband. It was a forbidden, hidden, passionate and inspiring love, this love by a humbled woman for the wrong man, both of them in the shadow of a great king and queen, a lunge for happiness by a woman without a life of her own. She obtained love all the same, but meted out in different portions, different colors, different words. Love needs time to be heard: love needs time to be seen and lived. That is why we kill it quickly with a rush into each other's arms, when love becomes unbearable as heat, as a devouring power destroys every human concern but love itself, turning love into the little death, the lightning ecstasy of a few seconds, which we all crave but can never remember with clarity.

A Love Letter

I miss you, my beloved. I miss you bodily, besides all the letters you gave me and that I keep safe from spies: this is like a wound, this aching need for you at certain moments. The void is so profound that the dwindling years of my life seem a wasteland. My past is extensive, but those were the years before I ever met you; you smashed my continuity, deranged my future. You transformed me in one night, and now my past, that past life which once seemed my future too, is just a void. Rebuild my life? No time for that. I burned my bridges in the few hours that you were breaking me.

I wonder about your life and efforts, far from me at court. You make great works of art there, works of gods made for eternity. I am there: you have a drug brewed from my blood. You are a man after all, for you sacrificed me to the Gods. It was always women to be sacrificed to gods, or children: best were young girls. I am not a girl; I know I am not young. I am said to be a beautiful queen in power, for people cherish me, and I sense their fear. I can kill without blinking. I have killed without a cause, for the pure pleasure of power. But you robbed the pleasure from my cruelty, you stole the beauty from my face, you put an end to my infinite power. As an immortal queen, I am telling you honestly: I long to die so that your work of Art may live.

One of the three of us must surely die soon, or all three of us will lose everything: honor, treasure, kingdom, light and life.

I am pondering that choice. It has to come as freely as water, through every pore of our love for each other and for the rest of the world. It has to be a natural choice in an unnatural situation where love is trigamous and god is monogamous. I am become a traitor, to my king my god my Only sun my Aten; I love the third, the Common, the Man, his hands, his body, the Other. But without your effort my beauty could not exist , and if you cannot give me existence, I am not even a shadow.

You made me live forever, and you may as well take my life anytime. Why didn't you kill me already, why do we three still persist? Is our empire falling apart, not because of the plague and the troubles, but because I have joined my body to another body... A common man, yet the man whose hands make my images royal, timeless, and divine.... Do we all three prefer art to life? Yes that is our doom, my beloved, my King Sun. That is our end.

You prefer the Bust to me, you prefer the Image to the reality, the Word to the Sun. You recite in your dreams your poems of royal praise and I dream of them without waking. You love his royal Image more than you love

my body. Your gaze, and his, make my body less real; you are making my body decay. My fertile body gave her life to this kingdom, and with her decline, the kingdom is stricken with plague. The King is growing sick with too many words and gazes, for the objects of beauty his court artists create. Akhenaten is dying of love and Beauty and Sun sickness. He is fainting in front of your creations, your images of his own beauty. I cannot protect us anymore because you have made me like a common woman of the streets, a prey to artists' grasping hands and peering gaze.

Beloved One, There Is No Such Way Out

There is no language for forbidden love, it is invisible.
Sing me a death-song to prove that you once loved me and my flesh.
The insects are walking all over my corpse, mosquitoes, ants, spiders -- but nobody can see them, they are swarming and rushing and biting within my shroud, and it is itching --
Therefore I am still alive. I have killed the demons in me;
I drank wine, I drank my own tears as if drinking wine,
I breathed the smoke of burning herbs,
I anointed my body with perfumes, oils rubbed into me by the warm hands of men and women.
I spoke no more of love with the words of love.
My very thoughts stopped.

Without such words: no truth, but also no lies.
Through your art, you have me; when I close my eyes,
I have not even myself.
Tell me what happened between the two of us.
Tell me that it happened at all.
Tell me anything.
You want to escape from my embrace because I still hold you within me.
I am destroying your safety, your pleasure, those cushions on which you lounge as a Man who needs nobody but himself.
But Beloved one, there is no such way out.
I have become the Image you made of me,
I am not myself any more.
My selfhood is wandering the city's shadows in ashes and lust
Through other people's lives and dreams.
My utter loss does not even make me unhappy,
For I am simply no more.
It makes me poor only in my selfhood,
Like a beautiful empty vase
Full of somebody else's knowledge.
Are you longing to see me again, now that you have my cold statue in front of you
To measure the difference time has made in my fading charm for you...
To make another such bust
Will be to make me grow old under your chisel

To kill me once again.
Did you plan to be my murderer, my artist, oh my true one
I long to see my own reflection in your eyes, for just one day
To become your stone Mirror.
I love being within your hands,
I want that now,
I want it all now
I may die but I want your body in mine,
or your hands carving my flesh into stone.

Oh now that you have taken what you pleased from me,
My God aren't you ugly, nude short coarse and dirty, stinking and smelling of male
I love that distorted angle of your back of a genius
I love the perfection of your mind
In your ugly, ugly distorted body
And you love my beauty because it is the mirror of your mind
But beauty does not come from any male mind thinking alone
You could not invent me, though you tried
Until I came, your proportions were false, too perfect for beauty
You needed that womanly strangeness, unpredictable perfection
I know the secret of art

I am art
And I shiver when I say "I shiver"
You kiss the spot at which I shiver
It is my secret, it is my belly
It is my maternity it is my fertility
It is my tie to my mother, to my child
And I let you kiss that spot with your lips, dip your tongue into my navel while I shivered
You sipped wine from that tiny cup within my belly
Through my shivers you tasted the energy of the world and life
And your hands tremble while you carve but they know the shapes to make
They are guided by my flesh curving under your tongue
The images still in you, intoxicating

I know everything about art
I am art
I do not enjoy art, yours or anybody's
I enjoy the act of creation and the tools, such as you
My tool, I need you to live
Without you I am dead
And you know it
Your distorted body is the image of your brain from inside
The creation in itself
The baby in the womb
The man yet to come on earth

The animal before the man the creature
The monkey laughing at humankind
Mocking the perfection
Created by the divine artist
Your sinless world created by God in a week's hard labor
Your gaze is that of your God
And I am the fresh-made world
And its humanity together
The animals, the seas, the rivers, the sun, the desert, the moon
The sand, sand, sand,
the finest particles of sand,
the sand, sand, atoms of sand,
shining invisible and true.

Nefertiti Will Dance For You

I want to lie
I want to cheat
I want to destroy
In order to create
From the world as it is
This dream world as it should be
As it used to be in its womb before it was born.

I will reflect it to you into your gaze through my belly, the end and the beginning of the world

Nefertiti will dance for you
Her last belly dance, that of a dead queen yet to die

I am made of marble
My mermaid body is of finest white stone
It is hard and not living
It is a lie representing an inner truth of the world as it really is
It is a prayer for the world as it is
Look at it forever and you will be good
To the others, to your God, to your animals
People and animals they both sleep on the floor
They sunbathe on the Nile, drink the same water eat the same crops
They kill one another
They eat one another
They die one for another
They shit and replenish the earth
People and animals are kin
But they should never pretend they are equal
The greatest sin against the sun is to consider it one's equal.

#

The elderly Queen Tiy has established a harem. Like any dynast she is desperate to see a son bred by the aging Akhenaten, father, or purported father, of six

daughters. With love and care she selects girls that might please the impotent creature on the throne...

There is one girl who accepts her anomalous and dangerous position with sweetness and good cheer.... Her name has been changed to Nefertiti too. The prettiest girls in Tiy's harem all envy the name of the queen, and the names of Nefertiti's daughters as well, since the daughters kiss their father Akhenaten, wait upon him lovingly, and are said to sleep with him.... A torrent of beautiful girls in Amarna, Nefertiti herself, the five surviving daughters of Nefertiti, the infant children of those daughters, their fathers being matters of mere speculation.... And now Tiy's harem of fertile concubines. The king is girlish too, in so many ways, for he never hid his big breasts, heavy thighs and round thick bottom. But he never took men in his bed, only girls, many girls.

Little Nef's mother had been a plaything of Akhenaten's father. The older Pharaoh liked to caress his concubine's scars, for she had many, having grown up in the streets of Heliopolis before escaping to pose her beautiful, wounded body on his harem couch. Little Nef had been a child of that union. Akhenaten's mother Tiy saw sense in recruiting the child: for that bold and grim and elderly but still very powerful woman knew how to shelter the dark and wounded, and to make the weak into her instruments of control.

A woman knows that power comes from sexuality. A bad woman knows it better than a good one, and that is why she can do much more with it than some chaste and pious woman fooled and ruled by the language of male power. She may be a treasured princess exalted in his beautiful tower, but only if she gets to the damp basement of her own silence, the cramps, the pleasure and pain, the thudding in the blood, will she be able to tell a man how he is going to live, and for what purposes he should suffer and die. She need not be a visionary sacrificing her own desire to learn that about power. She simply does it and does it all the time, even when she does not know she is doing it.

Tiy knew such things well: she picked her harem women from the needful streets, and put them in a place they considered safe. Those who failed to please Akhenaten might make pleasant gifts for ambitious courtiers. When the girls coupled with these men, they would bear children who were heirs of the street but as keen of mind as those who sired them. The world was never born of Gods but of bleeding wombs.

#

Come to me little Nef, come to me and please me
I will
Carry the oils and perfumes and take off those veils

I will
Take a fan and a whip with you, I feel hot
Please don't whip me, my lord
I want to spread my legs, open my belly and be sucked up by you
I will do that
I want your small head between my legs, like the head of a newborn child
I will do it
Like the head of the son I will sire upon you
I am yours my Lord
I want you to be my queen's baby and do the same thing to her
I will
Every day I want to have a baby with my queen and that will be you
Yes
We are giving you our juices of the god you will live forever as we do
I know
You will never die if you give us pleasure
I am
You are the pleasure
I am

And we will weep together when we get the pleasure, because the pleasure stops and you become mortal again.

One day little Nef never came returned from the royal chambers; her body was found floating in the Nile. Her neck bore traces of violence, bruises, the purple marks of squeezing fingers. Her face was however calm and pretty, she looked happy and in peace with her eyes wide open staring at the moon.

Her mother claimed the body; the scarred woman was silent, she did not wail.There had been rains and the crops were promising, there would be good food, feasting, perhaps not too many enemies... The eyes of Queen Tiy were upon her; they had once been consort and concubine, a relation always cautious and taut. The Queen Mother, old and weak-eyed, was staring bluntly; she knew much, but she did not dare to know as much as she should.The God King was drunkenly singing a song of farewell to the Moon; he had his agents at her back, these days. A silent court with fading hopes of continuity, a maze of spying eyes and lethal stares. The small Nef offered her last death-stare into the night sky. A stare with qualities of peace, truth and innocence, the last time that such qualities, always claimed by the regime, could still be found there.

#

The wind raised the sand: the invisible grains swirled in rotating spirals, slashing the air into sunset colors;

the light of God was fading. She found Akhenaten's eyes wide open as he slept. When the moon was full they were both restless. On such nights the Sun King would neither sleep nor wake: he would simply be.

Sometimes he would whisper, words and sounds nobody but Nefertiti could interpret. She was always by his bed when he was at his worst. While new, small Nefertitis would sprinkle his feverish body with water, put bits of fruit in his mouth. When the full Moon crossed the sky they would pour small sips of beer between his lips to ease the lunar passage. It cooled him in summer....He was whispering his own verses, slowly and without making sense, no passion left, no melody. His most visionary utterances never made sense as they tumbled from his mouth; they required Nefertiti there to give them sense. Gods, beauty and Truth always made One. He was was whispering like the desert wind, his anointed head tossing on his pillow. Nefertiti felt his skin, then climbed into his bed. His maleness was erect, hot to the touch, while his eyes were bloody and blasted. She spread her robe, spread her legs and climbed his loose-limbed,swollen body. Without a word or a sound their bodies were joined.

His eyes woke and became intensively active. She shut her eyes. Then she opened hers to find his peacefully closing. As the tides, low and high, they exchanged an

oceanic fluidity. They barely moved except for the shivering of their skins. And even that was nearly painful and required its own kind of soothing. His excitement was no longer distinguishable from his pain. The cosmos of pleasure within his eyes had grown dark and compact, the joyful pledge between their bodies fading with his broken health... But they had been divine lovers: a supreme couple provoking and accepting gifts of supernatural bliss. Six children from her body, there would be no more.... And yet to turn to any other man or woman in a forlorn search for what they had once given each other, that was an evil joke. They knew it now, just as everyone else did.

HAREM

Kyia was a foreign girl. Some said she had been a princess in her distant land, a land of cities between two rivers, a place with not one Nile but two. It seemed unlikely that she had been a princess; her manners were not elegant, her Egyptian nonexistent... It was enough that she had been found and delivered, with honor, by Queen Tiy. That night, that very first night, this exotic girl was shown to Akhenaten. She was barely 15 but she didn't cry at the strange sight of the ailing King. She seemed to know what was expected.A chilly December evening: full moon, some clouds made it vel-

vet red. Akhenaton never before met such a resistance, such a surrender, such a body which became no body: and in an instant he made her pregnant with his body. The two of them never touched again. Forty weeks after, Kyia gave birth to his son: in a harem, among 20 women mothers daughters friends and servants assisting the royal mystery. The women hushed excited and envious and yes afraid of this strange girl who was determinedly silent and yet blessed with a God of a God: in one year this girl outranked all other women of the court, with only Tiy and Nefertiti to restrain her ambitions. But Nefertiti was a Goddess too, and a mother of six goddesses: that was not a wall, that was an altar. Kyia seemed ready to adorn it with her black-eyed half-foreign babe, the dynastic heir at last, the gift to Kyia of whatever Gods they were that so clearly loved her. Because all loved her, men and women, after a year and a half. Sculptors drew her on the walls, on the stelae, on the sand. She had a silent, serious, pretty face.

King Horemheb

Horemheb was the husband of Nefertiti's half-sister, Mutmodjmet. He was not a God, and slyly aware that he never even wanted to be one. As a young boy he had been handsome strong and lively: shrewd and bright. Yet the odds of success were not on his side, for he

made no distinctions between gods and men. These were only words to him, never a serious issue; merely labels, like the different breeds of horses, kinds of flowers, vintage wines. His wife Mutmodjmet was the half-sister of a goddess. Yet to Horemheb, Mutmodjmet was just a wife.

He was a warrior, or such was his profession. As a trusted family relation, however, he was not sent to patrol distant frontiers. He was a state assassin: a queller of conspiracies, a hammer in the hands of queen or king. He had no hesitation in obeying such orders. Piety bored him, power interested him, and honor was not a concern. His ambition was to survive, and to make others survive by making yet others die.

Horemheb was not born a bad man. The privilege to be good, however, had never been granted to him. He had struggled from youth and poverty, into a family relationship with a Queen who had few others she could trust. When he became mature and powerful, the habits of court survival were already in his bones. His strength, wisdom and charm were all weapons of a kind; even when he chose to do good things, they were not manifestation of goodness, but entirely matters of policy. He had few pleasures, and his gifts raised mostly fear in the objects of his favor: even in his children.

The one exception was the pleasure he took in his solid marriage. His ruthless wife, Mutmodjmet, was the younger sister of Nefertiti. Mutmodjmet had never known the favor of her mother Tiy, and her behavior was not improved by her half-sister becoming a Goddess. Though a mortal, Mutmodjmet considered herself beyond issues of good and bad. She lived for bodily pleasure, she lived for the day, and except for Horemheb her lord and master, she seized every atom of every thing or person that ever came her way. Mutmodjmet was exactly as circumstances allowed her to be: she would kill without a second thought, for a kingdom if possible, for an apple, if necessary. She would have easily sacrificed the lives of her children to save her own. She adored and feared Horemheb, but as a woman she was only his caricature: she had no power in herself, no true need to take command. As Nefertiti's half-sister, she had never been poor or oppressed, and unlike Horemheb, she was not constrained to be wicked to survive. Her bad acts were gratuitous. She carried them out in order to feel more vividly, to assert her inner self, and to stain her sister the Sun Queen with a tinge of shadow.

As a couple, Horemheb and Mutmodjmet were a means to an end for their rulers, expendable yet necessary. They were as soulless as two drops of water, but if sunlight should happen to strike them, they knew how to

shine.

Horemheb the warrior did not kill Akhenaten, and when Nefertiti vanished, he preserved himself from embarrassment by seeing to it that she was not vigorously pursued. The weak and friendless children of the Aten heretics, though: Tutankhaten turned Tutankhamen, and Meritaten, eager for propriety -- they were not to be so lucky.

The General did rule at last the kingdom, after having buried many Gods. His wife became a pleased and calm old woman, as the many storms that had passed over Egypt finally settled a crown on her head. Their reign was rather prosperous and secure.

#

Who will hold my hand when I am dying, Nefertiti often asked herself.Who will cling to my hand as it stiffens and grows cold: a daughter, a servant, a doctor, a priest... All bodies born must decay, but hers had been so beautiful and holy. Would the artist do it, loving her body even in its decay. Watching it, cherishing it, kissing it with his lips, hands or chisel. A perverse consolation, one she had no name for.

THE SPEECH OF MEN

The heretic Queen has disappeared, for she failed to give the dynasty a son and is surrounded by enemies. Now the ailing Pharaoh depends for life on the hands and running feet of his favorite and confidante, Talib.

Talib is scrawny, beardless, fleet. He is a trusted young messenger, constantly running from the showcase city of Amarna to distant Heliopolis,the older capital, dominated by the priests of Amen. In Heliopolis Talib has a household: he has a young wife, a child. In Amarna he has a secret lover -- his wife's sister, the royal servant-girl Nefertiti.

It is of course extremely dangerous to be loved by a court woman who also shares the bed of a Pharaoh. Talib panicked at his first awareness of her murder, thinking she had surely died because of him. But no one dies for erotic license in the crumbling court of Amarna; they die of plague, or a bronze pick in the back of the head. The harem of the flaccid, red-eyed Akhenaten, a scramble of half-forgotten women in the loosening grip of the Queen's mother Tiy, has become a kind of brothel. Queen Tiy, lost to all other concerns, obsesses over the infant prince and his mother Kyia the foreigner, mute but plated in gold. Now these scorned harem women, once naked to the God and now deprived of any function

and reason, are prey to strange games of conspiracy....

She was always spying on him, little Nef. Her love was strange, intense, delicious, jealous. Always, she had a third eye only for him. Even when her two eyes were looking dutifully at the palace floor, her body swayed in response to his silent presence, both of them creeping in and out of the Pharaoh's chambers, both bent on unspeakable errands....

When Talib entered the presence of Akhenaten with the uniformly bad news from Heliopolis, he made it his habit to utterly abase himself. Messengers had been killed for far less than the missives he carried. He behaved not merely with a messenger's proper humility, but loping into court like an ape, bent down on all four limbs, scampering on the palms of his hands and the naked soles of his feet.... Akhenaten has forbidden the priests of the old gods to ever set foot in sacred Amarna, he regards them as a kind of vermin. So Talib, who carries their tainted messages, has learned to act like a beast afflicted with fleas.

He feigns madness, grinning idiocy. He is humbler than the lowest palace floor-sweeper, a creeping clown, a nonentity. And yet Akhenaten trusts him the way he would trust a dog; the rules and proprieties of court life simply do not apply to Talib. He busies himself with the

God-King's messages, running, barking, fetching, sniffing into anything he pleases. He has power without dignity.

The moment he errs or is found out, he may be castrated, torn to pieces, tortured or just kicked away like a dirty animal from this sacred hell or paradise. He has no choice but to bear that risk, and, having born it, he is even able to form his own ideas and tastes. Little Nefertiti is dead, strangled in moonlight by the Pharaoh's own long-fingered hands. But the harem has various other girls, with various other purposes.

They can offer pleasures, bribes, commands. Talib has taken red stains and written Akhenaten's royal poems on the slack flesh of the oldest concubine in the harem, Fatima. She indiscreetly boasted, that he, the runner-boy Talib, had possessed her body in the midst of writing Akhenaten's verses on her skin.

Fatima had herself brought nude to the Pharaoh, who showed polite interest, as he amused himself with a box of jewels and sand. He did not touch or cherish her aging body, but he did glance at her with care, and saw to it that Fatima was promoted. So she had won some shred of favor with those signs and images, and with the pleasing red color on her dark oily skin, and when the images and words shone in moonlight, making her

body seem precious and desirable, she rewarded Talib with a pearl.

It was too much for these beauties to bear to be silent and invisible, at least to one another.

They were privileged, by all means richly pampered, safe from wars and hungers, but never from their own politics. Every now and then one of them would burst and kill her foe, friend, baby or her own self. A decaying world with meanders and labyrinths, nuances felt and heard and answered. But with a dying king in a dying regime, such a life is a dead end, and a secret and a dangerous one. At any moment the nighted intrigues would burst out into the sun, to be stamped underfoot by the new men reigning the world. They would be turned from invisible women into licentious sinners, women who might be buried alive with their lovers who had taken secret favors, or banished into the desert as bribes for nomad chiefs, or sacrificed to Gods in a charnel-house royal funeral.

Rumors flew among the women; it was all they did. Perhaps some foreign ruler would burn all Amarna in hatred of Egyptian ways, or some drab conqueror would turn them into palace drudges, cleaning sewing and cooking, like the peasant girls they bullied.

The pharaoh's last nights are upon him. The harem drums in fear: God is unwell, unwell, unwell... The fear is big, the fear is all, the fear is not to be put in words. It is God they fear, their man who became a god, of the fear in itself, of the old gods who fought him as a Sun God -- and last of what he might do to himself, and to them, as part of his dying self.

His swollen head heavy, slack mouth dripping with nausea, the god-King has Talib fetch him a toy from the harem, a lovely shining star made of jewels, on a dish made of sand. It twinkled, it whirled, he played with it fervently for two sand measures of time. Then he felt unwell again: his eyes crossed, his face became red as the full moon in the rain and then his face turned white as the young moon when a virgin's stomach aches for children. The pharaoh is unwell and he can no longer play with his marvels.

His daughters arrive, lured by anxious messages and doctors. They are crying around his bed, though he is fitful he cannot recognize them. Meritaten wears a protective veil so that he cannot see that she carries in her hair and necklaces the signs and sigils of the older Gods. His heresy does not command allegiance even so far as the walls of Amarna. In Meritaten's province the officials and their chisels are cutting the hands from the Aten.... The daughters sob, because they are tied by

their own royal blood to the swollen creature in his royal bed, and his body's sicknesses may therefore some day become their own.

Their mother Nefertiti is said to know as well... She has fled into hiding, vanishing for her life, and quite likely dead, for she was cast away from court. Her loyal servants are all scattered, seeking new mistresses in distant cities or fleeing the country entirely. Talib contemplates the bare hands of the King, the hands that strangled his lover, and wonders what to do. He has heard certain things in the court and harem... a bed might be sprinkled with stinging nettles, robbing the sick one of sleep.... Blows and beatings might pass for the results of some angry, thrashing convulsion.... Talib the messenger is trusted and beloved by the Pharaoh; why then is his luck so bad that such a life scarcely seems worth living....

He can have any woman in the harem with impunity, big ones, small ones, two of them, a hundred maybe; they are beauties, they might be goddesses, but the prospect is as dry as sand to him, like a nameless grave. Akhenaton's debasement in his illness, his own debasement before Akhenaton, are even greater crimes than his small love's cruel death. This lolling, flaccid God with his endless girlish need for kissing and touching... A nightmare of harem women, who longed to

nourished this royal creature in their wombs, in their hearts, in their words and souls and images, and who could any moment drain his blood in ecstasies of frustration and rage. Talib was the beloved of pharaoh, so he stuck to the ruler in pain.

The ruler sat up his gilded deathbed, scattering his daughters with fear. His eyes bulged heavily, veins stood out on his swollen head. He started convulsing with rage: wine, beer, water, nothing would cool him in a demented fit like this. Talib jumped to his feet, and quickly ran across the palace floors. He waded into a sacred pond, a garden. He caught a white huge screeching animal, the feathers were falling, the bird was twitching in fear -- a royal goose.

He run to his pharaoh and he stuck the sacrifice in his trembling hands. Akhenaten took hold of the bird's neck as if grasping a caryatid of life. He focused on the screeching animal and pulled slowly at its long, vulnerable throat. When he finally released it, the head flopped loose,the pharaoh's exhausted, murderous arms hung like wax. Talib knelt before his dying God. Exhausted with grief, he began to weep.

The Necro-Concubine

I'll never know how I attained this throne.

In the slow wasps' nest of harem politics
Immured in cells, yet with a deadly sting,
A sultan's younger grubs are sacrificed once the favorite spreads his wings.
Gathered in our sacks of surplus flesh, we're plashed into the Bosphorus.
Silent, thorough, and only to be expected.

Yet through some plaguey mishap,
Some court jester's slip, a miscalculation,
The Sultan is me.

I the pale and scholarly, a bookworm haunter of manuscripts
Who never donned a sword or sacked a city
I am doomed to command this world.

My janissaries harvest the planet,
Themselves the adult creatures of the Balkan tax of boys.
They beat the sullen boundaries of empire
Recruiting voluptuous women.
Sloe-eyed and teenaged, as wild as deer
They are scrubbed and relentlessly disciplined
From village belle to jewelled objet
In the vitrine that is Constantinople.

With calicos, group baths and endless grooming,

Inducted in a nunnery of captive nations,
They sow not, neither do they spin.

I study them as I might study elephants.
Placid denizens of pampered femininity,
They never wave a flag or touch a coin.
Their thumbs go unstained by ink and they care not one whit for doctrine.
No wonder they bore one so.

Immemorial, elegant and gloomy,
This marbled world entirely without questions,
Where one waits a patient lifetime for one's intimate enemy
To attain the anticlimax of the garotte or the stiletto.

There is, despite all odds, one concubine I have come to favor.
The only creature in Topkapi unlikelier than me.

You.

The only woman who ever chose to come here.
Why you would do such an unearthly thing, no one seems to know.

You lack any obvious symptoms of madness.
Your customary slippers skid on the blue inlaid tiles,

A brocade vest and harem pants, a golden burst of hair,
You pluck at the zither, then you peel an orange.
Frankly, you look much like the rest of the great beau-
ties.
A little bolder and scruffier maybe.

I never saw anyone belly-dance quite like that.
That sudden tigress clashing
Of clacking castanets and brazen cymbals.

It would likely become remarkable
If anyone here ever noticed
That you always, always vanish with the dawn.

I built an invisible door just for you,
And I gave you its secret key.
But no one has ever seen you use it.

Lean closer on the divan so I can whisper now.

When the first dim rays lighten the turbans
On the heads of the slumbering eunuchs
There has come to the jeweled lobe of my royal ear
A departing chamois flutter of bat's wings
And on the pigeon-haunted innocence of a minaret
Or the lookout's spire of some far caravanserai
I can hear my blue-eyed darling baying at the Moon.

Farewell, Nefertiti

In the royal pyramid, not a tear, a slightly out of time reality: a goodbye, no divine rituals. The slaves are leaving, black white yellow, nobody speaks a language I can understand. I am losing my ears, my sight: I am drifting slowly into another dimension; a world without you, but not the same world I knew before I came to you. Another qualitative leap, and this one may be the last. I know myself as sister, sympathetic confidante and friend of the Sun Queen, the beautiful one who comes.

We Spoke of Jewels and Wine

We had a secret
I wonder, did you ever tell it to anybody
I did not
I kept it
And you know what
I am keeping it also away from you
Because you bother not to remember it
Now that you are leaving me and us all
I do not care about them
I do not care about your family, not even your daughters
I only care about YOU and ME
And I wonder about that secret of ours
Are you taking it with you in silence or should I mention

it
I am here, I am holding your hand and I am looking straight into your eyes
No trace of your secret
You do not want to speak to me about it
It is all around us
We are wrapped in it
It is US
Last time I saw you alive
We spoke of jewels and wine
We left out high fashion, spouses and money
It was too cheap even for us who kept silent for all these years
Did you forget it, our terrible sinful secret that will make us burn in hell
The secret of a 6 and an 8 year old
So sinful that it can blame all the children of the world yet to be born
I didn't.
Only yesterday before I heard you were leaving ME
I remembered the touch of the secret
Its body
And I wanted more of it
I craved lustfully to get the intimacy of that moment
When we were alone alone alone
When we were girls
Curly and free
You black I blonde

You fat I thin
You fallen I a nun
And yet we did it
You wanted it
I did it
Between two girls
Girlish cheap stuff
Grown ups looked down on us with scorn
Oh yes, they have all done it before us, all those generation of girlfriends
But who cares, you were the first one for me, I was the first one for you
And that will stay forever now that we are the last ones too?
It will last, it lasted and it is Last
I love you dearest, and I am letting you go, I will be coming soon you know
I never told you about my body
And its mortal secrets
It does not show because I am still here with you whom I have to see go
After you go, I will not have to be here anymore to see anybody off
I will be free, free of my own body
I know you want to stay
But I will not give you my life
But I am giving you my tears and my words
As usual

I am the last one of us three, the three witches
And the oldest one, the guilty one
I promised you both life and jewels
Besides being brave and beautiful,
I wanted you to have it all
But I cheated you because I gave you only words
Posthumously
And I am here now to again armed with words
To set you and then myself free.
Just watch me
I am writing it as a free person free of you and me
Our secret will finally fly high and free
And you know what
No big deal
In few words: I loved you and you loved me
More than other girlfriends and forever
If that a secret can be

Berlin, June 2003, in front of the famous bust, faces in stupor

I was told by an Egyptian historian from Palestine: Nefertiti is the queen we know least about in history, and yet the queen we most adore, cherish, admire. Cleopatra is the opposite: the more you know of this woman, the less you cherish her.

Perhaps the same is true for all things, beautiful, sublime and mysterious. It works for love, but why for women? Because they are queens, because they are women, or both? Why for Nefertiti, did she really exist, was she really the one who came and then vanished? Leaving not even a properly finished bust, but an artist's working model. In Berlin, where this stolen artwork persists in its abduction from the sacred Nile, one finds a phenomenon called Nefertiti stupor. Tourists confronted by the bust turn to stone, their eyes wander and minds burn. Why is that so? Because they come from all over the world in order to feel that way. The beautiful one has only one eye to offer them, while the other is blind as love.

#

We did our duty: we stirred our world from the underworld people had always inhabited: upside down, by dark not by light, devouring those elements which contaminated life.

During the ceremony for your death, my Lord, I was cast far out of your shadow, put aside from your dead throne. They never dared to mention I was still alive, your queen, your pharaoh's wife, your love and glory, your soul and body, in the body that gave you pleasure and that gave you the bodies of your children.

I have made them lead me to your eternal home, I sat beside your eternal bed, your sealed and golden coffin. And I made them seal me in: we are two Gods alone now: within that gold so chilly under my blind hands is the body once I touched with my hands, the divine body that made me lactate with a kiss and made my wound become wise in blood. Your body is now one huge glowing jewel, hard to touch and smell. It is cold and indestructible. My pharaoh is gone, he is a God dwelling with gods. I have lost him to eternity but eternity is kind to me at last.

So your Beauty has come, my lord, to serve you. I dared not choose any lesser tomb than this. One who was the wife of God can never become just a woman. In this royal crypt, in this stony dwelling, you and I have food, jewelry, servants of wood, boats, chariots, urns and perfumed oil. We are a loving pair left alone, free to play all the sweet games we used to play, and free of all the evil games that ever sought to confuse and part us.

Oh my beloved, oh my dearest, oh my last and only companion of the last path: I was your love and your queen, you were my Lord and I was your concubine, you were life and I was your essence, you were my joy and now that joy is eternal. Only the bats answer my need for your touch, they flit and flap, they are your words, your messengers, your sign, a sign that my

choice to join you here was true and beautiful.

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Nefertiti, my beloved friend, you are long gone, mere fragments of data in this stupid yet intelligent time. I your distant artist may have damaged your image, Your Highness, Your Holiness. Perhaps I lied about you, but from my thoughts and wonderings I gave you a life I thought you perhaps deserved. There are common moments when all women are queens out of power. This was our story which has come to an end. The passage of time, that universal police raid, has parted us and set us within in our separate cells. Two inmates serving time in our eternal presents, until we hack some hole through the texture of eternity, until we push our fingers, hands, kisses words through that, creating the loving bond uniting women.

May the love of my Nefertiti, that dream felt since my childhood, shield all that is good, and worthy, and starry, in me. So let it be.

Jasmina Te{anovi}
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